



*The
Townsbridge's
Series*

FALLING FOR
Mr. Townsbridge
A Townsbridge Romance

SOPHIE
BARNES

Falling for Mr. Townsbridge

The Townsbridges, Volume 3

Sophie Barnes

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FALLING FOR MR. TOWNSBRIDGE

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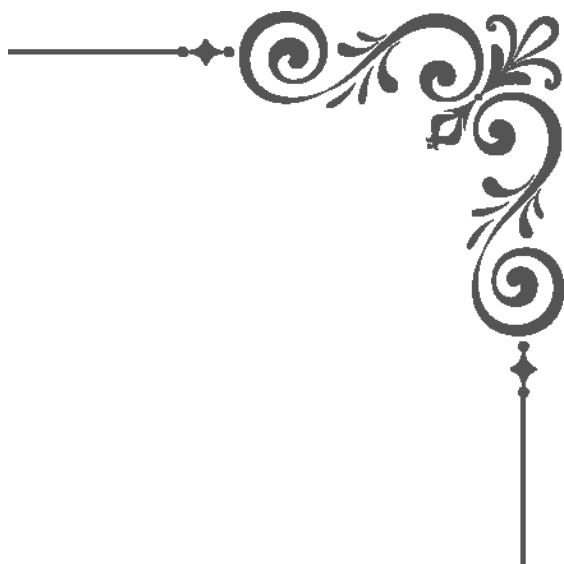
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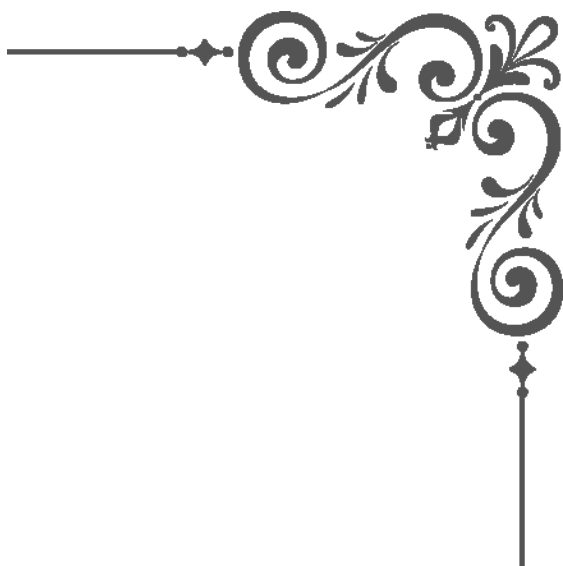
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Novels

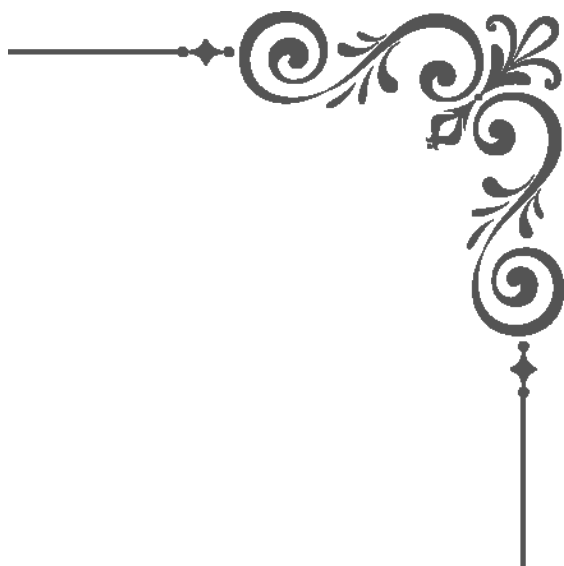
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Chapter One

Even though the London air was soaked with fine droplets of rain, it was still good to be home. Stepping down from the carriage, William Townsbridge paused to study the red brick townhouse with its white window casings. Beads of water gathered like dew drops upon his coat. A wry smile touched his lips. The delight he felt right now would most likely fade the moment he stepped through the front door and met his mother, Margaret, Viscountess Roxley.

As much as he loved her, he had no desire to be her marital project, which was part of the reason he kept on leaving. The last time he'd been home she'd kept on reminding him that his brothers had both married when they'd been six and twenty.

William had been one year younger than that at the time, but his mother had clearly believed it was time to prepare – for him to begin considering potential matches so he'd be ready to strike as soon as his next birthday came. It had passed with little fuss since he'd deliberately been away, working as the aide to the British

ambassador in Lisbon. Before that, his father, Lord Roxley, had helped him travel to America with the excuse of exploring new investment opportunities.

Prepared for what was to come, William helped the coachman unload his luggage, paid the man, and went to knock on the door. He'd already made plans to go away again in a month to visit a friend's holiday home in Florence. Until then, he'd simply grit his teeth and nod whenever some young lady's name was mentioned, while savoring the bone deep knowledge that his mother meant well. She loved him and simply wanted him to find the kind of happiness she enjoyed with his father and which his brothers had also been lucky to find with their wives.

Grabbing the knocker, William gave the door three loud raps and grinned when his youngest sister, Athena, came to greet him instead of Simmons, the butler.

Athena's eyes widened. A laugh escaped her. And then her arms were around his neck in a fierce hug. "You're back. Oh thank heavens. Sarah and I have missed you dreadfully, William. She more than I, I'm sure. My goodness, she'll be thrilled to have you home. You've no idea. No idea at all."

An odd sense of foreboding crept under William's skin. "What do you mean?"

Athena grabbed his arm and pulled him more fully into the foyer so they could shut the door. An exaggerated sigh of despair escaped her. And then she rolled her eyes. Although she was old enough now at the age of twenty for him to consider her a fully grown woman, her boisterous energy still made him think of her as a child.

"Mama is being impossible."

The whispered piece of information was barely spoken before the door to the parlor opened and the lady herself appeared. She was followed by her husband and William's other sister, Sarah. He met Sarah's gaze and barely managed to give her a quick smile before he was swept into his mother's arms.

"We've missed you," she said.

"I've missed you too," William told her loyally.

They broke apart just as Simmons made his appearance. "My apologies for not arriving sooner. It's good to see you again, Mr. Townsbridge. Please, allow me to take your bags."

"Thank you." William handed over his things, greeted his father

with a solid handshake and Sarah with another embrace.

“Come,” his mother said. “We’ll call for some tea and a snack to tide you over until dinner.”

“You’re in for a treat,” Athena said, traipsing behind as the family left the foyer. “Mama has hired a new cook. Mrs. Lamont is her name and everything she makes is utterly divine.”

William glanced at his father. Neither had ever cared much for food one way or the other. Eating was just a necessity – an inconvenience that got in the way of whatever else they’d rather be doing. And dinners always lasted ten times longer than William believed necessary.

“She’s not wrong,” Roxley said, much to William’s surprise. “I actually look forward to meals now, if you can believe it.”

Incredulous, William stared at his father for a moment. “Well, I suppose I’ll have to decide for myself.”

“But before you do, I’d like to hear your opinion on Sarah’s potential suitors,” William’s mother said. Everyone groaned, including Roxley, but she was determined. “There’s Viscount Belmont, Mr. Hastings, the Earl of Penwood, the Earl of Endry, Mr. Cummings, Mr. Dunnings, Mr—”

William stared at his mother while she continued to tick names off on her fingers. Five minutes later, he understood exactly why Sarah and Athena were so glad to have him home. They clearly hoped his presence would help distract their mother from her desire to get them settled by focusing more energy on him.

Ha! Not if he could help it. Although he really did pity his sisters. He knew how relentless Mama could be, and unlike him, they weren’t able to run away. But there was something wonderfully entertaining about watching someone else deal with her matchmaking efforts for a change.

William waited until she was done before saying, “I’m sorry, I forgot the first few names. Could you please repeat them?”

The viscountess knit her brow but proceeded to do so while everyone else glared at him. Athena looked like she’d like to grab the nearest throw pillow and hit him over the head with it. He suppressed a chuckle.

“Well?” his mother finally asked once she’d gone over all the names again. Tea had been served in the meantime, and a plate filled with interesting looking pastries had been placed on the table before him.

William picked one up, took a bite...

Oh dear God in heaven.

Rich cream laced with a hint of lemon burst from within the fluffy dough and filled his mouth with blissful pleasure. He groaned – *groaned* – and closed his eyes in acknowledgement of the divine moment.

“Good. Isn’t it?” Athena asked.

When William opened his eyes, she was watching him slyly while sinking her teeth into her own piece of perfection.

He nodded. “I don’t think I’ve ever had anything this good before.”

“Papa insists Mrs. Lamont must be a witch,” Sarah said while she selected a treat and passed the plate to her father.

“It does seem like the only logical explanation,” Roxley said, his eyes almost rolling all the way back in his head when he took a bite of the pastry he’d picked.

William ate some more and immediately lamented the loss of the treat once he’d finished off the last bite. “Why aren’t there more?” he grumbled.

His mother chuckled. “Because it would spoil our appetites for dinner. Have some tea, dear, and tell me your thoughts.”

“It’s incredible,” William said. “If everything Mrs. Lamont makes is as good this, you must be the envy of all of London.”

“Try England,” Roxley said.

“And I wasn’t referring to the pastries,” the viscountess said with a hint of impatience. “What I wish to know is which man you think might be best for Sarah. And possibly for Athena as well.”

“Please leave me out of this,” Athena grumbled.

“I don’t see why my opinion should matter,” William said. He picked up his cup and sipped his tea while offering Sarah a look of apology.

“He – the man she marries – will become your brother-in-law,” Mama explained. “You’ll have to spend time with him at family gatherings and—”

“To be clear,” William said, determined more than ever to put an end to this arduous conversation, “my only concern is for Sarah’s happiness. She could choose to marry a troll, and I’d still be cordial to the fellow.”

Athena snorted with laughter, earning a stern look of disapproval from both parents.

Sarah's lips twitched. "Thank you, Will."

"A troll indeed," their mother sputtered. She looked monumentally put out.

"Right then," William said, deciding to take advantage of her brief silence. "I think I shall go wash up and prepare for dinner."

"I'll do the same," Athena said.

"Me too," Sarah added.

"See you in roughly one hour," William told his parents.

He followed his sisters into the hallway and was halfway up the stairs before his father's startled expression registered. The poor man was now Mama's only audience, and William fleetingly wondered if he ought to feel some remorse over this. So he paused, glanced back down at the parlor door, and finally chose to continue his climb. Roxley loved his wife to distraction. He'd chosen to spend the rest of his life with her. And there was no way in hell William was going back in the parlor right now.

Instead, he took his time reacquainting himself with his bedroom. The books he'd enjoyed as a child still sat on top of his dresser in a neat collection of sentimentality. The pocket watch he'd received from Grandfather John on his fifteenth birthday gleamed in greeting when he opened the top drawer. A smile curved his lips as he pulled the watch into the palm of his hand. Grandfather John's sweet tooth had been undeniable. He would have loved those delicious pastries. The flavor still lingered on William's tongue, prompting him to ponder the woman who'd made them.

With a smile and a shake of his head, he returned the watch to the drawer for safe keeping and pulled out a neatly folded shirt. She was probably much like all the other cooks he'd ever seen: middle-aged and plump with a cheerful disposition. And most likely married to a very happy man, William decided with a grin.

This opinion did not change when he joined his family for dinner and savored his first bite of seafood mousse topped with dill and lemon. Or when a plate containing perfectly grilled slices of beef tenderloin was placed before him. The succulent meat melted in his mouth along with the baby potatoes and baked vegetables. And when the dessert arrived...

Ah, but it was yet another culinary masterpiece – a chocolate cake of some sort filled with nuts, so moist and sweet he wished he had several more stomachs to fill.

"Judging from that look on your face, I gather you will be

staying a while,” his mother teased.

“If you’re wise,” he told her dryly, deciding not to ruin the mood by addressing his plans for departure, “you will lock Mrs. Lamont away before someone steals her.”

“I think you ought to meet her,” Athena said.

Roxley coughed while their mother and Sarah both stared at her in dismay. William felt as though he might be missing something – a joke perhaps?

“I’m sure William has more important things to do,” Roxley managed to say while still clearing his throat. “Like calling on his brothers.”

“It was just a suggestion,” Athena muttered.

“And we thank you for it,” Mama said in that firm tone meant to put an end to a subject, “but Mrs. Lamont takes her cooking extremely seriously. I’m sure she would hate to be disturbed.”

The pointed look that followed gave William pause. He frowned. Something was up. His mother’s tight smile, Roxley shifting the conversation to what William’s exact duties had been at the embassy in Lisbon, the attention Sarah was giving her plate, and the mutinous look in Athena’s eyes all suggested they were hiding something.

Naturally, he meant to learn what it was. Which was why he allowed his father to invite him to his study for an after dinner drink, indulged him in whatever topics he wished to discuss, enjoyed a cup of tea afterward with his mother and sisters in the parlor, then excused himself and headed for bed.

Once in his room he waited until he was sure the rest of his family had retired as well, and then headed straight for the kitchen.



THERE WAS SOMETHING immensely satisfying about having the kitchen all to herself once the rest of the servants had gone up to bed. Eloise loved it. The Townsbridge House kitchen was large, beautifully fitted with everything a cook or a chef might desire. This was her favorite time of day – after the hustle and bustle – when she could prepare the next day’s meals, partly in her head and partly by jotting down some of the items she’d have to purchase the following morning.

A smile stole across her lips as she sat at the work table with her notebook and pencil. She never trusted another person to shop on

her behalf. This was something *Grand-père* Victor had taught her. Every part of every meal was her *responsabilité*, and as such, it was up to her to select the finest ingredients possible.

Taking a sip of the sweet mint tea she'd prepared, she made a few notes. If she was going to prepare her grandfather's specialty, she'd have to buy some fresh mushrooms. Perhaps some asparagus too. And a vanilla pod, if she was able to find one, for the dessert.

Eloise had almost finished jotting down the items when a soft scrape drew her attention. She looked up and paused. A man stood in the far corner of the room, just inside the doorway. Tall, with chiseled features, dark hair, a firm mouth, and a curious gaze, he was both handsome and intimidating all at once.

"Who are you?" Eloise blurted, even though she suspected she already knew the answer. Simmons had mentioned the arrival of the youngest Townsbridge son, so she supposed this would have to be him.

"Who are you?" he asked, echoing her words without giving an answer.

Eloise set down her pencil and stood. It was the polite thing to do, not to mention that he might not seem quite so tall if she weren't sitting. Of course she was wrong about that. She realized this as he crossed the floor, growing in size as he approached.

It was tempting to take a step back, to retreat and add distance. But that would only reveal how unnerving she found him. Her heart fluttered against her breast. It would show weakness while giving him the upper hand.

So she straightened her spine instead and raised her chin. "Mrs. Lamont," she told him. "I am *la cuisinière*. The cook."

He stared at her so long she started to wonder if she had flour in her hair or a smudge of sauce on her cheek. And then he smiled, slow and with wolfish delight.

A shiver raced through Eloise. She balled her hands into two tight fists. To respond in any way, if even with the briefest pleasure of his regard, was unconscionable and dangerous.

"You made those incredible cream pastries I tasted this afternoon?" he asked. She nodded. Once. "And dinner as well?"

"Oui."

Amazement brightened his eyes to a rich shade of walnut. "I must say, I'm thoroughly impressed. More so now that I've met you."

Eloise frowned. It bothered her that she always had to prove herself on account of her age. Lady Roxley had been hesitant, too, about hiring her, and Eloise had practically been forced to beg for a chance to show off her skills.

“Not what you expected?”

“Not at all.”

She flattened her mouth. “Well, you’re not what I expected either.”

The words were out before she could stop them, hanging in the air like a challenge. Why had she said that? What on earth was she thinking?

“Explain.” He crossed his arms and arched a brow.

Eloise fought to maintain her composure. Somehow she’d lost all common sense and walked straight into battle. And of course she was far too stubborn to back down now. So she ignored the voice of reason encouraging her to retreat.

Instead, she said, “Having met your brothers, I imagined you would be just as polite and charming as they are. Instead you barge in here—” a slight exaggeration, she had to admit “—intruding on my domain, as if it is your right to do so.”

Mr. Townsbridge blinked. “So you know who I am.”

She crossed her arms and gave him a very deliberate head-to-toe perusal. “It isn’t hard to figure out.”

“Then you must know I live here.” He was speaking to her as if she were an infant now.

Eloise supposed she deserved it, but his manner still made her jaw clench. “Fleeting, perhaps. As a guest.”

“Townsbridge House is my home when I am in England. It is the only permanent address I have.” He leaned forward. “I’ve certainly spent more time here than you. In response to that other comment you made, you should know that I intend to roam about as I see fit, Mrs. Lamont. No room in this house is off limits to me. Not even...”

Eloise gasped. Her eyes widened while heat rose to her cheeks.

“The kitchen,” he finished with a devilish smirk.

Anger flared within her, hot and prickly. The cad had been about to say, *not even yours*. She knew it as surely as she knew how to ice a cake or bake a soufflé. The arrogant mockery in his eyes was proof enough.

Initially, she’d wanted him gone because he’d been too attractive. The last thing she wanted was for some foolish fancy to

get in the way of her work. Except she'd been wrong to worry. Mr. Townsbridge was a beastly man – certainly not the sort who'd ever inspire more tender feelings within her.

A pity, since it meant his looks had been wasted.

Eloise grabbed her shopping list. "I think it's time for us to bid each other good night."

"If that is your wish," he said, turning away as if he'd lost interest in her. "I'll just fix myself a quick snack before I head back upstairs."

"The devil you will," Eloise exploded.

She froze as the words she'd spoken settled around her. Mr. Townsbridge swung back and pinned her in place with the most intense gaze she had even been subjected to.

"My," he murmured, "you are a feisty thing."

Eloise gulped. *Remember your place.* "For—" she cleared her throat and tried again "—forgive me. That was intolerably rude."

A slow smile slid into place on his face. "I probably ought to apologize too. For the teasing. It clearly made you uncomfortable."

She managed a stiff nod. Spending more time in his company was an incredibly bad idea, but the thought of him or anyone else rummaging through her cupboards was somehow worse.

Which was the only reason why she found herself saying, "Allow me to fix you a plate."

"Thank you. But I can manage."

"Not if you wish to leave this kitchen in one piece you can't."

He laughed, quite suddenly and with a shocking degree of mirth. Eloise pressed her lips together until her own laughter forced them apart.

"I can vividly imagine you chasing me with a rolling pin or a frying pan," he choked.

"The carving knife has just been sharpened," she said.

"Good God. You're not just a spitfire or a good cook, you're also a bloodthirsty hellion." He stepped back in mock terror. "No wonder my parents and sisters were trying to hide you. They must have feared for my life."

"They certainly have better sense than to try and meddle with my supplies." Although the truth was, Eloise had come to adore the family. They were kind and generous. She'd even begun considering Lady Athena her friend after they'd started spending their Sunday mornings together. And she appreciated the brief chats she

occasionally had with Lady Roxley whenever the viscountess wished to check up on meal plans.

Giving Mr. Townsbridge a wide berth, Eloise pocketed her shopping list and went to the cupboard. "Will a lemon cream puff do?"

"Make it two and we have a deal," Mr. Townsbridge told her.

Eloise deliberately kept her back toward him as she smiled. "It's *your* waistline, *monsieur*, not mine."

"The things you say," he muttered with a hint of wonder.

"You're quite unlike any other servant I've ever met."

Collecting a plate, Eloise retrieved the tin containing the leftover pastries and pulled off the lid. Risking a glance in his direction she told him wryly, "I'm French. Meekness is not in my blood."

A spark of awareness flared to life in his eyes, prompting her to drop her gaze quickly. She finished preparing his plate and handed it to him. His thumb brushed hers and her heart leapt. This was wrong, this response she was having toward him. Nothing about it made sense when only moments ago she'd been ready to hit him.

Avoiding further eye contact, she busied herself with putting the tin away. "I have an early morning so I must be off now."

"Won't you keep me company while I eat?"

Eloise swallowed. "*Non.*" She closed the cupboard and forced her feet to move toward the door. Reaching it, she paused to say, "It was interesting to meet you, Mr. Townsbridge. I hope you enjoy your snack."

She turned away.

"I trust your husband is also in my parents' employ?"

"No. I'm not..." Too late, she realized what she'd revealed. Cooks were always referred to as Mrs., no matter their marital status, and keeping Mr. Townsbridge in the dark about hers would have served as a useful line of defense. If she'd been wise enough to leave him wondering, that was, or even better if she'd lied.

"Duly noted."

The comment chased her out of the kitchen and into the servants' stairwell, all the way up to her room on the top floor of the house. She didn't pause for breath until she was safely inside with the door shut. Good heavens. The way he'd said that, with seductive promise, was enough to set her ablaze.

She patted her cheeks and expelled a deep breath.

No.

She absolutely could not allow herself to be alone with that man ever again. Not only because of the threat he posed to her job but because of what she feared he might want. And judging by how quickly he'd replaced her indignation with amusement, she worried he had the skill to acquire whatever he might desire.

Which meant she would have to avoid him at all cost.



ACCUSTOMED TO RISING early for work, William woke before six the following morning. Stretching his arms up over his head, he thought back on the previous day's events and smiled. Mrs. Lamont had been a delightful surprise. She'd obviously wanted to smack him for some of the things he'd said and how he'd behaved, and frankly he could not blame her. But that hadn't made her ire any less thrilling.

William sat and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Her playful side had been alluring. The sense of humor she'd revealed, a combination of sarcastic wit and self-deprecating quips, like a cool refreshment on a hot summer's day. With a few clever retorts, she'd made him laugh more openly than he could remember doing since he was a child. She'd been fun, her company allowing him to escape for the briefest of moments the staid restraint he invariably felt subjected to on account of his position.

And then, of course, there was her appearance. When he'd first laid eyes upon her, he'd quite forgotten himself. Petite, with dark curls scrunched up into a knot at the back of her head, piercing blue eyes and rose colored lips, she was quite possibly the most stunning woman he'd ever seen.

And you can't have her.

No. Of course he couldn't. Not that his interests in her lay in that direction anyway. She was the cook, for heaven's sake. He was just pleased with her culinary skills and the fact that he had the chance to enjoy them. Beyond that, there was nothing at all.

Of course, if she'd been a lady he might have considered the possibility of courtship at some point in the distant future. But she wasn't. She was an employee. Nothing more. End of story.

He stood, considered ringing for the footman who always served as his valet when he was in Town, and dismissed the notion on account of the hour. He was a grown man, for heaven's sake. He knew how to dress himself. And Mrs. Lamont was of no interest to

him at all. Her unmarried state was inconsequential. She was completely uninteresting to him.

Yes. And the sky is also green, you idiot.

William shook his head and dressed. He would simply have to avoid her from now on. Shouldn't be hard as long as he kept himself out of the kitchen. Right. Excellent plan.

He left his room and went downstairs. Breakfast wouldn't be served until nine, which gave him more than two hours to kill. And since the newspaper hadn't arrived yet either, judging from the empty spot next to his father's place setting at the table, few options remained.

With this in mind, William strode toward the front door. He'd go for a walk, get some fresh air. Hyde Park was a good half hour away on foot. By the time he got there, took a turn of his favorite path, and made his way back, breakfast would almost be ready. It was a perfect plan.

Happy with his decision, he grabbed his hat and gloves from a cabinet in the foyer and put them on. He then exited the house and was just descending the front steps when he spied Mrs. Lamont coming up the servants' stairs at the very same time. And just like that, whatever thoughts he'd had of avoiding her flew away like a migrating bird.

"Good morning," he said, pausing to wait while she opened the gate in the wrought iron fence that bordered the servants' entrance.

She glanced up. Hesitation and wariness filled her eyes. A tight smile finally caught the edge of her mouth. "*Bonjour.*"

"I trust you slept well," he said, falling into step beside her once she'd closed the gate and commenced walking.

"Indeed." Her eyes were trained upon the horizon. Whatever hints of amusement she'd allowed herself to reveal last night were locked away now, that much was clear.

The sudden urge to poke her until she either exploded with laughter or fury was far too tempting. William cleared his throat. "Excellent weather, wouldn't you say?"

It was gray and slightly foggy.

Mrs. Lamont's lips twitched. "Quite."

"Perfect for a picnic. Or perhaps a garden party of the more dreary variety."

They turned a corner and Mrs. Lamont stopped. Had she not been carrying a basket with her, she would probably have placed

both hands on her hips. Instead, she jutted her chin up and stared him straight in the eye. "Is there no one else in London for you to pester?"

"Not at this hour."

"Well, then..." Her brow puckered. William decided he liked her like this – a little irritated and slightly off balance. "Surely you must have an errand to see to since you decided to venture out so early."

"I merely desired a walk." He took her by the arm and resumed his progress, forcing her to come along with him. "Now that you're here I even have company. Allow me to carry your basket."

She locked her fingers more firmly around the handle and moved it out of his reach. "That won't be necessary. Thank you."

He smiled at her. "Have you always been so stubborn and unwilling to accept help?"

"My parents taught me the value of self-reliance."

"Self-reliance is one thing. Trampling on a gentleman's honor is quite another." He kept his tone light because he knew he was being unreasonable. But for some peculiar reason, he really wanted her to accept him, to lean on him a little, and to regard him as a friend instead of an adversary.

Her mouth twisted. She glanced up at him. A sigh followed. "You're right. I'm sorry."

William's chest expanded. Victory! Forcing back the boyish grin that threatened to stretch across his entire face, he took the basket from her and tucked her hand more securely in the crook of his arm. There. Much better.

"Where are we off to, by the way?"

"To the vegetable market."

"Is that all?"

"For now."

She walked stiffly by his side, her discomfort with the close proximity undeniably obvious. He knew he was being too forward, but keeping his distance from her felt wrong. There was a curious rightness to having her close.

William had never visited a market of any kind before. He'd had no need to, so the early morning hustle and bustle intrigued him. Keeping a firm hold of Mrs. Lamont, he allowed her to lead him between the stalls. Occasionally, she'd stop to consider a product. She might even pick it up and turn it over a number of times before putting it back.

William watched with baffled amusement. "What was wrong with those onions?"

"Too squishy," she informed him.

"And the asparagus?"

"Wrong shade of green."

"I never realized shopping for food was such a challenge."

"Having the right produce can make the difference between an edible meal and one that will leave your belly aching." She drew him toward yet another stall. "Now these asparagus look fresh. See the tips, how solid they are? And they're lighter in color as well."

William picked one up while Mrs. Lamont began bargaining with the vendor. "What will you use them for?"

Her eyes sparkled when she glanced up at him. "You'll see."

William could scarcely wait. He'd never been very fond of asparagus, but with Mrs. Lamont's culinary skill taken into account, he had a feeling that was about to change. And he simply loved how enthusiastic she was about everything she selected.

"Here, smell this," she said, shoving a mushroom toward him.

His instinct was to recoil from the filthy looking thing she held between two fingers. Instead, he leaned in and took a hesitant sniff.

An earthy scent filled his nostrils. It wasn't unpleasant but oddly clean and invigorating. He frowned. How on earth was that possible? Puzzled, he glanced at Mrs. Lamont. She chuckled with unabashed delight. "Odd, isn't it," she mused, "how even a soil-covered mushroom can be inviting? I believe these were picked last night."

"Indeed they were," the vendor informed her.

She smiled, showering the mushroom with the sort of adoration William wished she'd direct at him.

Wait.

What?

He was just accompanying her here because he was bored. That was all this was. Nothing more. And yet he knew he was enjoying himself far too much for it to be quite so simple. The joy she took from something as ordinary as vegetable shopping was remarkable. More so the fact that she'd managed to make him find pleasure in it as well. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and it occurred to William that he'd not enjoyed himself this much in years. If ever.

"This was an excellent outing," Mrs. Lamont declared once they were walking back to Townsbridge House. She'd purchased some

onions as well, along with some plump tomatoes, lettuce, and strawberries. "I feel quite inspired."

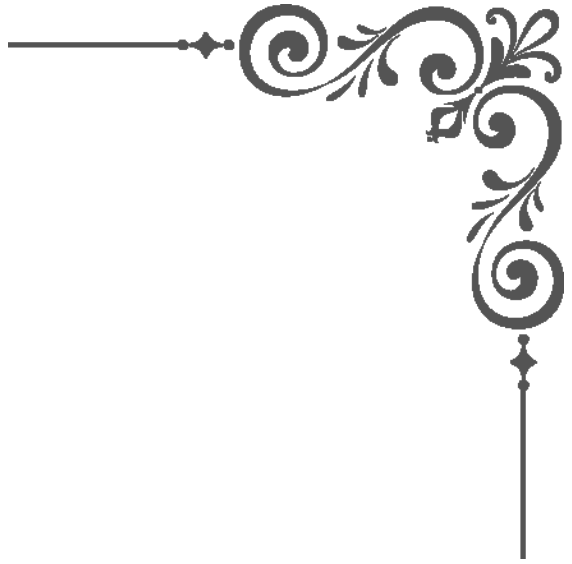
"And you haven't yelled at me once."

There was a pause. "It must have something to do with the weather."

"It's starting to rain," William pointed out.

"So it is," she said. Glancing up, she caught his eye. Her lips curved slightly upward until a dimple formed at the corner. "In that case, I suppose I must be starting to like you, Mr. Townsbridge. Who would have thought?"

William's chest tightened in response to her words. For as long as he could remember, the only women who'd shown an ounce of interest in him had been dazzled by the idea of attaching themselves to the son of a viscount. Not one had made him laugh or told him he was likeable. Mrs. Lamont was different – down to earth and genuine in a way that was hard to find amid the aristocracy. And by God, he liked her as well. More than he probably ought.



Chapter Two

There was no doubt in Eloise's mind that she had abandoned all good sense and stepped into dangerous territory. Her flip-flopping belly proved it. As did her fluttering pulse. Most especially because both were linked to thoughts of Mr. Townsbridge. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to stop thinking about him. Not even after they had returned home and parted ways. Every corner of the kitchen and every vegetable she used reminded her of how they'd met and how charming he'd been this morning at market.

Shaking her head, she forced herself to concentrate on the eggs and bacon she was preparing for breakfast. Her place was in the kitchen. His was above stairs in a world so apart from her own he might as well be living inside a fortified castle without any doors or windows. And why on earth was she even thinking in those terms when she barely knew him?

It was ridiculous.

“Smells like heaven,” said Matt Cleaver, one of the three footmen in the Townsbridge employ.

His smooth voice startled Eloise out of her pointless daydream about an unattainable suitor.

“I’ve made a little extra so you and the rest of the staff can have some too,” Eloise said.

“That’s why I love you,” Matt said with a smile. His brown eyes sparkled with pleasure. “As long as you’re cooking there’ll always be joy in the world.”

Eloise grinned as heat bloomed in her cheeks. Matt was a wonderful man whose flirtatious nature always brightened her day. The two had formed a close bond during her employment, which was something Eloise valued simply because it made being far from home so much easier.

“I met the youngest Townsbridge son last night,” Eloise said while piling the eggs and bacon onto a serving dish. She went to select a couple of tomatoes which she proceeded to slice while toasting some bread in the leftover fat. “He came to get a late night snack.”

Matt’s eyebrows rose. “Uh oh.”

Eloise chuckled and started arranging the tomato slices next to the eggs and bacon. “He was pleasant enough once he realized I was serious about him not meddling with my kitchen.”

“And?”

“Well... He accompanied me to the vegetable market this morning.”

“Oh dear.” This was spoken as a sigh. Matt gave her a pointed stare. “You have to distance yourself immediately, Ellie. Do not let your heart convince you there’s no harm in being his friend or spending more time together, because, I swear to you, this will be an impossible road for you to walk. It can only lead to disaster.”

Eloise bit her lip. “I know. You’re right. It is just—”

“He’s a wealthy bachelor who’s destined to marry an equally wealthy lady of high standing. You can never hope to be more than a brief affair, if even that.” He caught her hand and squeezed it. “If you allow yourself to form an attachment with him, you risk losing your job along with the good opinion of your employers. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not.”

“Good.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Then stick with me

instead and avoid Mr. Townsbridge.”

It was sound advice, so Eloise nodded and handed Matt the serving dish she’d prepared. “This is ready to be taken upstairs.”

He winked at her and headed off. Eloise paused for a moment to ponder his words. Mr. Townsbridge was both handsome and charming. It was only natural for her to respond toward him as she did. But with every additional encounter, the risk of her developing feelings for him would increase, and Matt’s prediction of where that could lead was nothing short of terrifying.

Determined to keep both feet firmly planted on solid ground, Eloise told herself to forget about Mr. Townsbridge this instant. She had lunch and dinner to prepare – tasks that were sure to keep her fully occupied for the rest of the day.



ONE WOULD THINK EGGS and bacon was a simple, uncomplicated dish that generally tasted the same no matter who prepared it. The moment William took the first bite of his breakfast, however, he knew this was incorrect. Mrs. Lamont’s eggs and bacon outranked all of his previous servings by miles. The bacon was perfect – crisp and golden – and the eggs slightly fluffy somehow. He’d no idea how she’d managed that but he made a mental note to complement her achievement the next time he saw her.

Happy with this decision, he wished his parents and sisters a good day, excused himself from the table, and went to call on his brothers. Athena’s eyes narrowed on him as he strode toward the door. William simply smirked and snatched an extra piece of bacon from the sideboard on his way out the room. She could wonder all she liked about his exceptionally good mood. He certainly wasn’t about to mention his run-ins with Mrs. Lamont.

He halted in the process of putting on his gloves and wondered what her given name might be. *I’ll figure it out.* Satisfied with this newfound goal, he donned his hat and left. Fifteen minutes later, he was standing in his oldest brother’s study.

“Perhaps we should call on James together,” Charles said in reference to their middle brother. “Otherwise, you’ll just have to repeat the account of your time abroad yet again.”

“It would also be nice for the three of us to spend time together the way we once used to.”

“Agreed,” Charles said.

They stepped out into the hallway but didn't even reach the front door before two small bodies careened toward them with shouts of glee. Miniature hands and fingers clasped at Charles until he lifted his son and daughter up into his arms for a hug.

William watched with amusement and, he'd later recall, with an odd ache somewhere near his heart. He'd greeted his niece and nephew along with their mother, Bethany, when he'd arrived, but this show of affection was something else entirely.

Perhaps, he mused, nothing would ever be as before. His brothers were married now with wives and children of their own. Their loyalties had shifted and William acknowledged that it would never truly be the three of them against the world again. But they might be able to offer some valuable help and advice.

"What do you think of Mama and Papa's new cook?" he asked once he and Charles had set off at a casual pace. James' newly acquired townhouse wasn't far. They'd reach it in less than ten minutes.

Charles met James's gaze with a raised eyebrow before facing forward once more. "She's not what one would expect."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Her cooking is superb," Charles added.

"It certainly is."

"And she's extraordinarily pretty."

"Yes." William nodded while picturing Mrs. Lamont's bright blue eyes, the mischief about her when she joked with him, and the pleasure she showed when she spoke about food.

"Stop it," Charles chastised.

William missed a step and stumbled slightly. "What?"

"Whatever it is you're thinking, rid your brain of it right this instant."

"First of all, you've no idea what I'm thinking and—"

"I know it involves Mrs. Lamont and judging from that devilish grin you're wearing, I'd say you've got scandalous intentions where she's concerned."

Very well. His brother wasn't entirely wrong. Although...

"I'd like to think my intentions are noble."

"That's impossible considering the circumstances."

William was starting to wonder if he'd made a serious error in judgment when he'd decided to call on Charles. He gritted his teeth. "I'd never treat her unkindly."

"Is that what you think I'm implying?" Charles gave him an incredulous look before striding up the front steps of Number 10 Charlotte Street. The butler opened the door after the second knock and showed them into the parlor.

"Will, it's good to see you again," James said as soon as he entered the room after being alerted to Charles and William's arrival. He shook William's hand before glancing at Charles. "You too, of course."

Charles jutted his chin toward William. "He wants to bed Mrs. Lamont."

William almost choked on his tongue. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to," Charles informed him with the imperialistic smugness of an older brother who thought he knew everything. "It might as well be painted all over your face in crimson letters."

"Good God," James muttered. He stared at William. "You have to swear you'll do no such thing."

"I never suggested I would," William insisted. Honestly, he was starting to get quite annoyed.

"It would be cataclysmic," Charles said.

"Utterly disastrous," James added.

"I merely agreed to finding her pretty. *He's* the one who suggested everything else." William pointed an accusatory finger at Charles, who merely snorted and took a seat.

"Then you'll have no issue with keeping your distance from her. Will you?" James went to ring the bell pull.

With a disgruntled sigh, William sat opposite Charles and propped his head in his hand. A maid arrived, coffee and biscuits were ordered, and then the three men were left alone once again.

"I shouldn't have said anything," William muttered.

"You were right to do so," Charles said. "Temptation can be hard to resist, but it's important you do so now. Before it's too late."

"Consider the following," James said in a gentler tone as he took a seat adjacent to William. "You're an eligible bachelor and she's a young woman. From an external point of view, you are her employer and she is your employee, even if Mama and Papa are the ones paying her salary. Anyone who sees the two of you chatting together at greater length or sharing a joke will assume the worst."

"She'll be labeled your mistress even if she's not," Charles stated.

The coffee arrived and the conversation paused for a moment

until the cups had been filled and the maid who'd served them was gone.

"Mama and Papa will have no choice but to sack her," James said. "And neither of them will thank you for it, I can promise you that."

"So then—"

"You must keep the appropriate amount of distance," Charles said. "Better yet, forget her completely and find someone else. I'm sure Mama has a list of suitable young ladies lying about somewhere."

William bristled. "I have no interest in courtship or marriage."

"Then all the more reason for you to leave Mrs. Lamont alone," James said. He shared a cryptic look with Charles, who answered with a nod, then quickly added, "Perhaps telling us what you've been up to this past year will help."

"I did write," William grumbled. The brilliant mood he'd been in all morning had dimmed significantly during the course of the last hour.

"Yes," Charles said, "but you never gave a descriptive image of Lisbon or a detailed account of the people you associated with during your stay there. Surely you must have made friends."

"I did. And the town itself was a marvelous experience."

Thinking back, William described the colorful buildings and narrow streets, the plazas lined with orange trees and the fresh ocean breeze.

As the conversation progressed and turned toward his brothers and the birth of James' first child six months earlier, William relaxed. His initial reaction to what they'd said with regard to Mrs. Lamont had been outrage. He'd gotten defensive. But the truth was they were probably right. What sort of relationship could he possibly hope to pursue with her besides one in which she would be ruined? So maybe the right thing to do would be to stay above stairs from now on and keep his distance. It was what he'd planned to do on his own before he'd happened upon her this morning.

Charles and James weren't wrong. She was from a different social class, and if he showed an interest in her, people would start to wonder about the nature of their relationship.

Perhaps if he kept himself busy, he could forget about her all together.

"Do you still box and fence?" he asked, the question so sudden

his brothers both blinked.

"I gave up boxing a few months ago but I still fence," Charles said.

"I do both," James said. He offered a wry smile. "Want to join me one day?"

"Yes." William snatched up a biscuit and took a bite. "When I was in Lisbon, I swam almost every morning, and when the weather didn't allow for that, I rode. The exercise was invigorating – much better than all this sitting about."

"We could head over to Gentleman Jackson's this afternoon if you like," James said.

"I would," William said. "Very much so."

"And I'm happy to spar with you tomorrow and Thursday," Charles said.

William appreciated the offer. "Maybe we can also meet for luncheon one day at Mivart's?"

"Sorry," Charles said. "Bethany and I have something of a luncheon ritual with the children. You're welcome to join us if you like."

"Thank you." William glanced at James. "How about you?"

"I haven't eaten at Mivart's in a while," James said. "Name the day and the hour and I'll be there."

A schedule was confirmed and by the time William headed home to collect his boxing equipment, he was satisfied with his increasingly full schedule. Tonight he'd go to White's in the hope of meeting some of his friends. Hopefully, he'd be able to convince them to go fishing, take a ride out of the City, or meet for a game of cards.

If all went well he'd be mostly away from home for the next week, after which he'd simply have to repeat the process.

Yes. This could work quite well. He had no doubt about it, and as it turned out he was right. His brothers and friends kept his mind away from Mrs. Lamont. They joined him for breakfast, luncheon, and dinner at various restaurants and clubs, ensuring that not even food would tempt him with thoughts of the lovely French cook. His parents and sisters were naturally perplexed by his insistence to stay away from the house, and he was equally reluctant to offer an explanation.

But when he arrived home one afternoon for a quick change of clothes and the smell of baked goods wafted toward him, William's

resolve wavered. Someone – a servant most likely – had forgotten to close the door to the stairs leading down to the kitchen. The temptation the sweet scent offered was overwhelming as it swirled around his nostrils.

Unable to resist the pull, he advanced. He reached the door and paused with his hand on the handle.

Just close the door and step away. Right now.

His body leaned forward until the aroma engulfed him. His feet moved. The top step creaked beneath his weight. William's mouth began to water and before he knew how it had happened, he'd arrived in the kitchen where servants hurried to and fro while doing chores.

The scullery maid's eyes widened the moment she saw him. She almost tripped over her feet as she hurried past, barely managing a curtsy before she ducked inside the larder. One of the grooms who'd been taking a break in a corner leapt to his feet. He set the cup he'd been drinking from down so quickly, its contents spilled over the side. Offering a hasty nod he fled before William had a chance to stop him.

Ludicrous.

William shook his head. One would think he had the plague, considering the speed with which he was able to clear the room. Allowing his gaze to wander, it slid across the hot bread rolls resting on the work table, and toward the woman who'd made them.

His heart stopped. Or at least that was how it felt. Because Mrs. Lamont wasn't alone. She was standing with flour-covered arms elbow deep in a bowl, kneading dough while laughing in response to something one of the much-too-young-and-far-too-handsome footmen was saying. His name was Matt Cleaver and while William hadn't really had an opinion about him before, he suddenly disliked him intensely.

Don't engage.

Ignoring his own sage advice, William moved farther into the room, until he was able to see Mrs. Lamont's pink cheeks and the smudge of flour across her chin. A stray lock of hair curled next to her brow and her eyes, while downcast and focused upon her chore, crinkled at the edges with amusement.

An ugly sensation grew inside William, writhing and clawing until he felt sick. Clearly the roast beef he'd had for luncheon at

that new place one of his friends had recommended was disagreeing with him.

What else could it possibly be?

Forcing a bland smile, he looked at Matt. The footman hadn't noticed him yet. Neither had Mrs. Lamont. But that was about to change.

"If I knew baking could be such fun, I'd have taken it up years ago," he drawled.

Matt's head jerked sideways until he found William. "Mr. Townsbridge."

"Indeed." William noted that Mrs. Lamont had chosen not to deign him with her attention.

He reached out toward the bread rolls, allowing his hand to hover above them. Matt sucked in a breath and Mrs. Lamont slowed her movements. There was a pause in which it felt as if the continued existence of the world was at stake.

And then she glanced toward him and said, "If you touch those right now, you do so at your own peril."

Oddly, instead of getting annoyed, the most peculiar compulsion to sweep her into his arms and kiss her struck him squarely in the chest. Feeling brave – at least a great deal braver than what was probably wise – William raised a brow and lowered his hand.

The footman took a step back and shook his head. *Don't do it.*

Mrs. Lamont's brilliant blue gaze latched onto William's, jolting his heart into rapid motion. He wasn't sure what compelled him, perhaps her domestic appearance, her challenging gaze, the dreadful sensation twisting around in his gut, or possibly all three combined, but rather than withdraw, he grabbed a bread roll and shoved it into his mouth while staring straight at her.



ELOISE WASN'T SURE how to react. Ordinarily she would have yelled at anyone brave enough to tamper with the food she prepared. But Mr. Townsbridge had more right to the freshly baked bread rolls than a servant. Yet she had warned him, so she really ought to follow through with her threat. He had thwarted her after all, challenged her even, and if she did nothing in response, she would be yielding to his control.

Somehow, she had to regain the upper hand. It was the only way for her to maintain her composure, to not lose herself in all the

odd feelings he stirred within her, to recover from his sudden appearance after not seeing him for nearly a week.

She'd enjoyed their outing to the market more than she ought. And she'd expected him to show up in the kitchen no later than the following day. But then he hadn't, and rather than dismiss the issue, it had prompted her to wonder when she would see him again and why he was staying away, and oh, she almost wished he would go back to where he had come from so she could stop feeling so edgy.

At least then he'd be out of her life for good.

Except now he was here, watching her while he chewed on a bread roll. A smug gleam in his eyes dared her to do her worst.

Pulling her shoulders back, she raised her chin and removed her hands from the dough she'd been kneading. "Those aren't intended for you. They're meant for your mother's charity event this evening, and now I am one short."

Mr. Townsbridge swallowed the bite. Brief hesitation dulled his eyes before he narrowed his gaze and said, "My mother hasn't mentioned any charity event to me. I think you're bluffing."

"I never bluff." Flattening her mouth into a straight line, Eloise placed her hands on her hips. "My schedule is calculated with exact precision, Mr. Townsbridge. I don't have time to make additional bread rolls now."

He glanced at the half eaten one in his hand. "Er..."

"Neither do any of the other servants, so that leaves you."

Mr. Townsbridge's mouth fell open. Matt sputtered something inaudible that sounded like a combination of humor and shock. Eloise hoped he would leave before he upset her goal.

"You're making a new dough right now, though," Mr. Townsbridge said. "I can see it from where I'm standing."

"That is the pie dough for luncheon tomorrow."

"But—"

"Unless you wish to disrupt your mother's event by denying one of her guests a bread roll, you ought to clean your hands, grab that bowl, and begin measuring flour."

He gulped, glanced over his shoulder, and slowly turned back to face her with wide eyes. "I'm supposed to fence with my brother."

"In that case you probably ought to get started." She raised both eyebrows.

Mr. Townsbridge looked at Matt, who held up both hands while backing away.

"I'd do as she says," Matt said. He gave Eloise a look that warned her to be careful before removing himself to some other part of the house.

"How about an apology?" Mr. Townsbridge tried. He added a smile that threatened to melt her bones.

Annoying man.

Determined to keep up her guard, Eloise raised her chin and met his gaze boldly. "I'd certainly appreciate one, but you're still making another batch. Now go clean your hands. There's water and soap over there."

A clear scowl marred his forehead as he trudged across the floor. Eloise hid a smile and went back to kneading her dough. When Mr. Townsbridge returned to the work table, he grabbed the bowl she'd pointed to earlier and reached for the flour. "How much?"

"You might want to remove your jacket."

"How much?" he gritted.

Eloise shrugged and gave him the amount, then watched as he lifted the bag of flour and started pouring it into the measuring cup he held. As expected, the flour poured out much quicker than he'd anticipated, spilling over the sides of the cup and filling the air with a cloud of white.

Mr. Townsbridge made an impossible attempt at righting the situation before he gave up and coughed. Eloise bit her lip and tried to force back her laughter. But when the haze cleared and she saw he was covered almost entirely from head to toe in a fine layer of powder, she exploded. Mostly, because she wasn't sure how he'd managed it.

"You knew this would happen, didn't you?" His tone was dry.

"Honestly," she choked, "I had no idea."

"Really?"

He didn't believe her. Eloise tried to regain her composure and meet his gaze, but doing so just made her laugh even harder. "I did try to warn you. Oh dear, I think it's in your ears."

"Hmm."

She had about two seconds to figure out what *hmm* meant before something soft and airy breezed over her face. Stilling, she opened her eyes and licked her lips. Flour. He must have tossed a handful at her while she'd been laughing, if his victorious grin was any indication. Reaching up she touched her cheek.

"*Alors...*" Eloise withdrew her hand and studied the white-

covered tips of her fingers. She pondered her options while casting a glance at some nearby eggs. Tossing one at him was tempting, but it would also be messy, would certainly ruin the egg, and possibly his clothes as well.

So she picked up the small bowl of water she used for rinsing her hands and smirked.

He tracked her movement. "Don't you dare."

"Did you not just throw flour at me?" she asked as she started toward him.

"That was different." He backed up a step when she rounded the corner of the worktable and approached him, bowl in hand.

"It was deliberate, *n'est-ce pas?*"

He swallowed and backed up further. His hands rose before him like a shield. "A mistake, I assure you."

She paused for a moment. "You're making quite a few today, Mr. Townsbridge."

"Yes. Well. I really ought to go." Panic was creeping into his eyes. "The fencing with my brother, if you'll recall."

"You still have to bake, and clean yourself off." The devil inside her – a creature she'd not even known existed until this moment – rubbed its hands together in glee. "I can help you with the last part."

Mr. Townsbridge's eyes widened. "Mrs. Lamont. I—"

Eloise dipped her hand in the bowl and flicked a spray of water at Mr. Townsbridge. It was more than she'd intended. Droplets dripped from his hair and ran down his face.

She covered her mouth with her free hand. "Oh dear."

His eyes narrowed, not with anger or irritation, but with playful intent. "Oh dear, indeed."

Eloise inhaled sharply and planned her retreat, but before she was able to move, he stepped toward her with shocking speed. The bowl tipped, sloshing water all over the front of her apron. She gasped, reached behind her, and grabbed a handful of flour. But before she was able to fling it at him, his hand clasped her wrist.

"No more," he murmured. He was holding her steady and leaning in, gazing down into her upturned face, eyes sparkling with humor.

Eloise sucked in a breath. He was close. Too close. So close she could smell his masculine scent – a rich combination of sandalwood oil and exertion. Her heart skittered, the foolish thing. And her

stomach began twisting about in all sorts of peculiar directions.

Unable to stop herself she lowered her gaze to his mouth, to the perfect slope of his upper lip and the fuller firmness of the one beneath. When she looked back up, his expression had changed. All humor was gone and if Eloise could have retreated further she would have done so, but somehow the work table blocked her escape.

Mr. Towsbridge inhaled and his nostrils flared. Awareness, as thick as a fragrant perfume, began overwhelming her senses. Her mouth went dry. She wanted to shake her head in denial of what was happening. He wasn't the right man for her. It would never work. She was merely a servant.

And yet her heart pounded. "Mr. Townsbridge."

He reached up and stroked her cheek, only briefly, but the touch was enough to ignite her skin, and she let out a low sigh of pleasure.

"I must have your name," he whispered, his breath like a gentle breeze wafting against her. "Your given name."

"Eloise," she confessed before she was able to think of the repercussion.

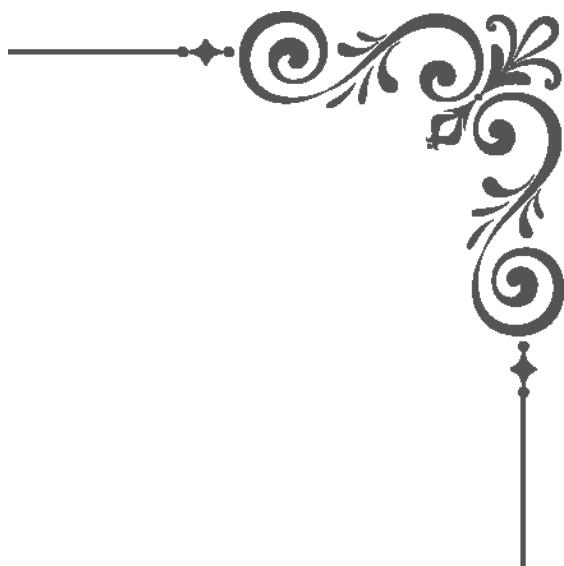
"Eloise," he repeated as if in a daze. And then he stepped back, adding the appropriate amount of distance. "You may call me William if you wish."

All she could do was blink and nod like a dimwitted fool. Her heart still raced like a rabbit chased by a ravenous fox. She didn't even have the ability to tell him it would be inappropriate for her to do so, she was so overcome by the forceful effect of his nearness.

He tried to dust off some of the flour with his hands, but it wasn't very effective. "I need to go now, Eloise."

Again she just stood there, trying to comprehend what had just transpired. Had they really been throwing flour and water at each other? It was absurd and...and wrong. Everything about this encounter with Mr. Townsbridge had tipped her world off its axis. She wasn't sure how to react anymore.

It wasn't until he was gone that she realized he'd gotten away without making a single bread roll. A disgruntled sigh left her. She shook her head and began cleaning the mess they'd made, all too aware that she was in serious trouble. Because for a moment there, perhaps even longer, she'd actually hoped he might kiss her.



Chapter Three

He wasn't supposed to like her. He wasn't even supposed to be thinking about her, and he damn well wasn't supposed to find her remotely attractive. But when William woke four days later to yet another memory of how desirable Eloise had looked the last time he'd seen her, he knew every gentlemanly intention he harbored had been shot to hell and beyond.

Like him, she'd been covered in flour and wet, but that had not detracted from her beauty or charm. Quite the opposite, however odd that might be. And it had been his fault right from the start. Because he'd wanted to tease her, to poke at her a bit in a selfish attempt to pull her attention away from Matt.

What had followed—the sparing, the teasing threats, and finally the close proximity rife with awareness—had almost caused him to take advantage. He'd withdrawn at the very last second, had walked away and refrained from meeting with James. He'd been too shaken, too distraught by what he'd discovered, to keep his

brother's company.

Instead, he'd locked himself in his bedchamber so he could ponder his problem alone. Hell and damnation. He didn't just like Eloise or find her attractive. Oh no. He wanted her like he'd never wanted anything or anyone else in his life. Mostly because he loved how she made him feel – as if he were just an ordinary man with whom she was comfortable larking about.

Irritated by the impossibility of it all, he made his way down to breakfast. To his dismay, only Athena was present when he arrived.

He glanced around as if to make sure his parents weren't hiding in one of the corners. "Where is everyone?"

"Church," Athena told him. "It's Sunday."

"Of course." William took a seat at the table and selected a piece of toast. He studied the various selections of jam and finally settled on a cherry preserve. "You still refuse to attend?"

Athena sipped her tea. "I will go when it's important, as I did for Charles's and James's weddings. Besides that, I'd rather stay away."

William understood her reasoning even though he would have expected her to have gotten past the scandal she'd caused by now. It had been six years after all. He rather believed most people had forgotten about it and moved on. Charles and Bethany certainly had.

But Athena had been much younger back then, only fourteen years of age, so it was only logical if her actions and all the events that had followed had left a lasting impression.

"What do you usually do instead?" He sank his teeth into his crisp slice of toast and was once again reminded of Eloise as the tart flavor of cherries and sweet syrup astounded his taste buds.

"Any number of things." Athena eyed him with an almost unnerving degree of interest. "Today I'm planning a short excursion out of Town, so I can gather wildflowers to press for my collection. I'll be taking a picnic luncheon. You should join me, Will. It would be nice to spend more time together. We don't do it often enough, and even though you've been back for over a week and live here, I feel as though I hardly see you."

She did have a point. After all, he had been deliberately staying away. And with no plans of his own today, Athena's suggestion could serve as yet another distraction while preventing him from heading straight back to the kitchen after breakfast.

He smiled. "All right. I think a day in the countryside sounds

like a splendid idea.”

Athena beamed. “Excellent. I’ll make sure additional food is added to the basket.” She finished her tea, set her cup aside, and glanced at a nearby clock. “My intention is to leave at ten. Can you be ready by then?”

“Certainly.” William gathered some eggs and bacon on his plate and set to work on them while his sister went to get ready. Ten minutes later he’d finished his breakfast and returned upstairs. He changed into more practical clothing and cleaned his teeth before going back downstairs.

“Your sister is waiting for you in the carriage,” Simmons informed him as he handed William his hat and his gloves.

William thanked the butler, donned the accessories, and strode out of the house. He opened the door to the carriage, registered that the forward facing bench was full, climbed in, and sat down across from Athena.

And Eloise, it appeared.

William stared at the woman who captured most of his thoughts these days and filled his heart with longing. He blinked, just to be sure he wasn’t imagining her.

She stared at him with a similar degree of surprise. “What are you doing here?”

The blurted question interrupted his own. He knit his brow. “I could ask the same of you, though I rather suspect I already know the answer.”

“I did mention that Eloise would be joining us,” Athena said, her face as innocent as a cherub’s. “Did I not?”

“No,” William murmured. “You did not.”

“I’m sure I must have,” Athena said. “Eloise and I always spend our Sundays together. She doesn’t attend church either, you see.”

Eloise smiled tightly. “I wasn’t raised in a religious household.” She shifted on the bench and glanced longingly at the door. “I should leave so the two of you can enjoy a family outing together.”

“Nonsense,” Athena said. She quickly tapped the roof and the carriage lurched into motion. “You’re my dearest friend and as such you simply must stay. I cannot imagine a Sunday without you.”

William scowled at his sister. She always had the best of intentions, but meddling had consequences, and he’d rather hoped she would have realized as much by now. And what was that part she’d just said about Eloise being her dearest friend? He’d have to

quiz her about that later when Eloise wasn't present. For now, it was time for politeness, reassurance, and gentlemanly behavior.

And besides, he was actually rather pleased with the idea of spending half a day with the woman who visited him in his dreams. Perhaps it would help him figure out how to make her his.

"There's really no reason for you not to join us," he said while deliberately meeting Eloise's gaze. The edge of her mouth curved with hesitation, and William's heart thudded harder than it had before. "After all, you did prepare the food."

"What an excellent point," Athena said. She added a very deliberate nod and settled back against the squabs.

Eloise's cheeks pinkened and she averted her gaze. Appreciation warmed a place deep within William, filling him with pleasure and satisfaction. The carriage rolled onward at a comfortable speed, and one hour later, they arrived at their destination.

William helped Athena alight first, then extended his hand to Eloise. She hesitated briefly before accepting his help. Her fingers clasped his and a shock of heat raced up his arm. She sucked in a breath, her startled gaze found his, and William's heart soared.

Whatever doubts he might have had about her returning his regard were extinguished in that moment. She would be his. She had to be. He certainly wasn't about to let Matt steal her away.

Determined not to let thoughts of the young, cheerful, and dashing handsome footman dampen his mood, William went to help the driver unload the picnic basket and blanket from the boot. Together, they set everything up while Athena and Eloise took a short stroll.

The spot was extraordinarily picturesque. Grass in various shades of green covered the gently sloping hillside. Clusters of wildflowers added splotches of red, blue, yellow, and lilac. A brook wound its way past the foot of the hill. A thick copse of trees stood immediately beyond it, and a gentle breeze added a pleasant coolness to the air. Had he been an artist skilled in oils or watercolors, this would have made the perfect location for a landscape painting.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Athena asked in a rush as she came to join him. Eloise trailed behind, her pace more careful and calm.

"You certainly have an excellent selection of flowers here," William agreed.

"Yes. Let's eat so I can start gathering them." Athena plopped

down on one corner of the blanket and eagerly opened the basket. "Will the two of you not join me?"

William waited for Eloise to take a seat before he, too, lowered himself to the ground. There was something about her today – a timidity of sorts. It was thoroughly charming and yet so unlike the feisty woman he knew her to be. In all likelihood, his presence unnerved her. Perhaps because she knew he'd almost kissed her the other day?

Reminded of the incident, he accepted the plate his sister had filled for him and said, "Mama says she's having a charity event next week."

Eloise kept her eyes carefully averted from his, but the color in her cheeks deepened.

"So she is," Athena said. She tried a piece of pie and sighed with appreciation. "This is so good, Eloise."

"Thank you." Eloise added a smile.

"Apparently, she hasn't had one in over a month," William said. He opened the bottle of wine they'd brought and poured a glass for each of them. "Which would mean she didn't have one this week."

Athena chewed on another bite of pie while narrowing her gaze. "Whatever are you getting at, Will?"

"Oh, nothing." He grabbed the chicken leg he'd been given and eyed Eloise while munching on it. Eventually he said. "I do hope Mama will inform you of the number of guests she's expecting, so you'll have enough time to make each of them a bread roll."

"Bread roll?" Eloise asked. She finally looked at him with what appeared to be wide-eyed confusion, only there was mischief there – laughter directed at him. "This is to be a charity event, not a dinner party."

"So there will be no bread rolls?" William asked.

"I think we've established as much," Athena muttered.

"On the contrary," Eloise said, "I shall make petits fours and tiny little sandwiches for the guests to pick at."

So she *had* been toying with him. He'd known she had to some degree when he'd wished his mother good luck with the event four days earlier, and he'd learned it wasn't for another week. Apparently, her teasing had gone even further than he'd realized. He'd circle back to that amusing fact later. For now, he was far more interested in getting to know Eloise better.

"How did you become a cook?" he asked her boldly.

She seemed to mull the question over for a moment before confessing, “My *grand-père* taught me.”

“Your grandfather?” This, William hadn’t expected.

“He was a chef,” Athena explained as if she knew all there was to know about Eloise’s family history.

Annoyed for some absurd reason, William frowned. “At a restaurant or—”

“He worked for a family. Much like I do.”

Athena pursed her lips while glancing at Eloise. It looked as though there was something she wanted to add, but in the end his sister kept silent and returned her attention to her food.

“I see,” William said, even though a sneaking suspicion growing inside him insisted he was missing something – a key piece being held beyond his reach. “He’s retired now, I gather?”

“Indeed.” Something akin to pain flickered in her eyes for the briefest second before it vanished once more. She ate some bread and a sliver of cheese before adding, “His health hasn’t been the best this past year, but at least my parents are there to support him and offer whatever assistance he needs.”

“You’re close.” William watched Eloise intensely as her eyes began to shimmer. She nodded before pretending to busy herself with some grapes. “Then you must miss them all terribly.”

“I do, but I also need to work.”

“And you cannot find an acceptable position in France?” Not that he wanted her to. Hell, he was damned grateful she’d come to England and taken up residence in his parents’ home so he could meet her.

“Will,” Athena said, her voice slightly tighter than usual. “I think you’ve quizzed poor Eloise enough for one day.”

“It’s quite all right,” Eloise said, but something in her voice suggested the subject of conversation distressed her. She inhaled sharply, forced a smile, and raised her chin. “Many noble families in France became extinct a few decades ago. And since I refuse to seek employment with the *nouveau riche*, coming to England seemed like a better opportunity.”

“Of course,” William said. He finished the food on his plate without saying anything else. For some absurd reason his questions had dulled the mood, and he somehow felt more adrift and uncertain than he could recall ever feeling before.

“Well,” Athena said after sharing a brief discussion with Eloise

about the latest novel she'd purchased and planned to lend her, "I think I'm going to get started on my collecting."

Eloise opened her mouth, but Athena was gone before she managed to get one word out. She looked at William with no small amount of uncertainty, then gave her attention back to the grapes.

"You got the better of me the other day," William said. "I almost ended up making bread rolls."

"And yet you managed to escape the task." A hint of a smile pulled at her lips. "While leaving me with quite the mess to clean up."

He knit his brow. "I'm sorry. That was badly done of me. It's just... Well the thing is that if I'd stayed I probably would have kissed you."

Her head jerked up, her gaze colliding with his in a look so startled it took him slightly aback. Surely it shouldn't surprise her. She glanced around, then told him hoarsely, "You should not say such things."

It was rather inappropriate, but then again, "I prefer to be honest with you."

"Nevertheless." Her entire face had turned a deep shade of crimson.

William was sorry to have caused her discomfort, but he wasn't sorry he'd let her know where he stood. The attraction was simply too strong for him to keep bottled up. And he couldn't speak to his brothers about it – not after they'd made their opposition clear. Confiding in his sisters or parents was even more impossible. They'd be horrified by his developing feelings for a servant because it breached what ought to be an innate code of conduct. And leaning on his friends was equally undesirable since none would be able to relate.

So that left the object of his desire. He considered her for a moment. She was clearly out of her element here, the manner in which she kept nibbling her lip indicative of her agitated nerves.

"Let's go for a walk."

"A walk?"

"Yes." The idea appealed even more now that he'd suggested it. Movement would serve them both good. It would give them something to do with themselves until they found their way back to comfortable conversation. "We can take a closer look at the brook."

"But your sister—"

“Will be fully occupied for the next half hour.” He stood and offered his hand.

Eloise stared at it as if it were scalding hot and threatened to burn her. Eventually, she reached up, clasped his fingers, and allowed him to pull her to her feet.



THERE WAS NO DOUBT in Eloise's mind that Athena had deliberately planned her brother's attendance. The question was why. As far as Eloise knew, Matt was the only one aware of an interest between them.

Since her flour fight with William four days earlier, she'd done her best to avoid thinking of him, which was more or less possible during the day, as long as she wasn't baking. But at night, when she climbed into bed and tried to sleep, it was near impossible not to have him invade her thoughts.

She looped her arm with his and allowed him to lead her down the easy slope of the hill and toward the brook. Away from Athena, she noted. After what he'd just confessed, she was even more uncertain of being alone with him. On one hand she desperately wanted that kiss, but on the other, she was terrified of what the consequences would be if she allowed such intimacy between them.

“Did you enjoy living in Portugal?” she asked when they'd gone a few paces. It occurred to her that she wanted to know all there was to know about him, and this seemed like an excellent place to start.

“I did.” His eyes shone with genuine pleasure. “The climate was almost always pleasant with much milder winters than here. The food was excellent and, I think, healthier than what I've always been used to in England. Until I returned and discovered your cooking, that is. I'm quite sure nothing in the world can beat it.”

Eloise thanked him for the compliment, then said, “It sounds as though you miss Lisbon.”

“In a way. My life was different there – more purposeful because of my work at the embassy.”

“You could prolong your position, could you not?”

“I received an offer to do so but declined. A year that far away from my family was long enough. It was time to come home and ponder what to do next.”

“You're different from most men in your position.” When he

gave her a quizzical look, she explained, "From what I gather, the sons of peers don't usually seek employment, except through the church or military."

"Legal professions are also acceptable. In fact, they're traditional for third sons, but my family isn't very traditional. If they were, James would have bought a commission years ago. Instead, he and his wife have entered the manufacturing business. They've hired seamstresses to create stylish and inexpensive clothing for those who can't afford a modiste or a tailor. Abigail, my sister-in-law, designs them. She's got quite a knack."

"I did hear a couple of maids discussing it some time ago but didn't pay too much attention since I was sure they must be mistaken. After all, it is uncommon, but I have to say it's also impressive. Being in a position of constant judgment by the *ton*, it must take tremendous courage to stand apart and be different. I rather admire it."

"Me too." He chuckled lightly. "I sometimes wonder if I'd have what it takes to thwart expectation and face condemnation in pursuit of my dreams."

An unexpected tension gripped Eloise's muscles. "And what are your dreams?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure yet."

Her insides twisted. Of course it was foolish of her to think for one second that they'd involve her. And even if they did, he'd just confirmed that he didn't want her enough. Whatever he felt would never allow him to pursue more than a brief flirtation. Of course it wouldn't. How silly of her to think it might.

"I'd love to open a culinary school one day," she said, hoping her own dream would help lift her spirits.

"That's quite an ambition."

"A real dream ought to be, don't you think? If it's easily attainable it's more of a task you decide to complete as opposed to a goal you must work toward or hope for." His mouth slanted, the left side scrunching a little as if in thought. "I've made some calculations and since I don't require much on a daily basis, saving the majority of my salary ought to allow me to realize my dream in about ten years."

"Good lord. That is a long time."

"It will certainly require patience, but in the end it will be a wonderful achievement. I hope." Inhaling deeply, she allowed the

fragrant smell of the countryside to infuse her senses. "In my opinion anything worth having requires work."

"One could say your food is testament to that notion."

He smiled at her with charm and warmth and such openness that it was easy for her to imagine him pulling her into his arms and holding her close. Of pressing his lips to hers and offering her a glimpse of what life by William's side would look like.

Fearful of how her heart might suffer, Eloise pulled away and went to inspect the brook. She needed distance, a chance to collect her thoughts and regain her composure – time in which to build a much needed wall between them.

"Eloise."

Her name whispered close to her ear, sparking her awareness until every nerve in her body strained with anticipation. "Don't. Whatever it is you mean to say, please don't."

"I've been thinking at great length," he said, as if she hadn't spoken, "and I'd like to make a suggestion."

Eloise turned toward him. She knew what he would say. There was only one option really, and it would not involve an offer of marriage. It couldn't. So she balled her hands into fists and forced her spine into a rigid position.

"No. Whatever it is you're hoping for it's not going to happen." Taking advantage of his momentary surprise, she walked away as fast as she could, hastening back up the hill with every intention of finding Athena. Spending time in William's company had been a monumentally bad idea.

"But you don't even know what I was going to say."

"Of course I do," she hissed at him over her shoulder. "I am a servant and you are a viscount's son, so if you want what I think you want, then there's only one way to achieve it and I won't allow that."

"But—"

"*Non! Arretez.*" She swept her hand out in a gesture of finality. This thing between them, whatever it was and however much it made her heart beat faster, was over.

Spotting Athena, Eloise breathed a sigh of relief and forced a smile. "There you are. Did you manage to find some good specimens for your project?"

Athena turned toward her. She nodded, then frowned and tilted her head. "Why does my brother look so sullen? Did the two of you

quarrel?"

"Of course not," Eloise assured her. "That would imply I am in a position to question what he might say when all I am is a servant."

Athena responded with a belligerent look. "You're more than that, Ellie."

"My mother was, perhaps, but I'm not, and while I do enjoy your company, I cannot afford to forget my place. It would help a great deal if you would try to remember that." *Instead of trying to match me with a man I want but cannot have.*

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"There's no need." Eloise managed a wide smile. "Now let me see the flowers you've found."



SHE'D REJECTED HIM before he'd even had a chance to voice his idea. Irritated, William thrust his rapier at Charles, striking his padded chest with brutal force. A good thing they weren't fencing with real swords, or he would have impaled him on the spot.

"Well done," James applauded from the sideline.

Charles stepped back and glared at them both. "This is supposed to be an elegant sport based on skill, yet all you've displayed here this afternoon, Will, is anger. And it's given me a damn bruise to boot."

"I'm sorry," William said. "I got carried away."

His older brother's scowl didn't diminish. "It's her again, isn't it?"

"Mrs. Lamont?" James asked, his voice incredulous.

"You haven't managed to evict her from your mind yet," Charles continued. "Have you?"

William shook his head. He had no energy left to argue. "No."

"Christ," Charles muttered.

"I think it's time for us to intervene," James said.

"Absolutely not," William told them. He wasn't sure what their suggestion would be, but he was fairly certain he wasn't going to like it.

"Distracting yourself with us and your friends clearly isn't enough," Charles said. "You've been doing it for almost two weeks, and yet our parents' French cook is still on your mind."

"You need a woman."

I certainly do. I need Eloise.

“Not that woman,” Charles muttered, reading his thoughts. He followed the utterance with an exasperated sigh. “A different one who can see to your needs so you can stop panting after Mrs. Lamont.”

William frowned. He detested the imagery Charles crafted with his words. “I’m not a dog.”

James snorted. “You’re after one particular thing.”

“Unless, of course...” Charles mused.

“Unless what?” William asked when his brother began strolling toward the changing room. He shot a confused look at James before jogging after Charles.

Charles shrugged his broad shoulders. “Unless you love her.”

Startled laughter rose up William’s throat. “Love her?”

Charles halted his progress and turned to face him with shocking seriousness. “Yes.”

William shook his head and glanced at James, who’d approached in the meantime. His expression was equally grave. “If you love her, bedding another woman isn’t likely to help.”

“In fact, I suspect it might make everything worse,” Charles murmured.

William flattened his mouth. “I’m not in love with Eloise—” both brothers raised their brows on account of him using her given name “—but that doesn’t mean she can be replaced by some harlot for hire. Good lord. You’re so besotted with your wives you can’t see an alternative.”

“Which is?” Charles asked.

“That I simply want her the same way I wanted that blue kite when I was little. The green one papa eventually bought me was probably equally good but it wasn’t the same.”

“You know,” James said with a wry twist of his lips, “in the dark you wouldn’t have known the difference, and I rather think—”

“Ugh.” Disgusted with both his brothers and what they implied, William shoved his way past them. Eloise was special, funny, charming, and spirited. No one could replace her, not even in the dark. But how could he make them understand without their insisting he must love her if that were true?

He couldn’t, and he was through trying.

“I think I’ll walk home,” he said when they parted ways outside the fencing club half an hour later. “The fresh air will do me good.”

“I can walk with you if you’d like some company,” James

offered.

“Thank you, but I’d prefer to walk alone, if that’s all right. See you later?”

“Of course,” Charles said. James merely nodded. Both had a dubious look about their eyes – the sort that seemed to say without words, *you’re drowning, reach for a life line, damn it.*

William simply turned away and started toward Townsbridge House. He had no use for their pity or for the guidance they were trying to give him. And keeping his distance from Eloise wasn’t helping. He’d thought that if he filled his days and kept himself busy, he’d avoid thinking about her. But that wasn’t the case.

As the days went on, he just thought of her more, regardless of whether or not he saw her. In fact, it had gotten to a point where seeing her, or at least being near her, actually offered some small relief. Even when she was trying to push him away.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he turned onto Oxford Street. His heart still beat in a steady rhythm, but it felt heavier than usual. How on earth was he going to solve this conundrum? How was he going to convince her to listen to him and accept what he wanted to give her?

He glanced toward a shop window and stopped. Several books were on display, but one particular one caught his eye. *French Landscapes in Color*. He studied the beautiful cover for a good five minutes while weighing his options, and eventually decided to inquire about the price.

“A stunning piece for any library collection.” The clerk was an enthusiastic older gentleman with a beaming smile. He placed the book on the counter and pushed it toward William. “Have a look inside. It’s bound to take your breath away.”

William opened the book and was instantly drawn in by the vibrant display of color depicting a lavender field stretching toward a rustic farm house with rolling green hills in the background. He turned the page to a vineyard, then to the Mediterranean shore. Each image was labeled with the location where it had been painted, along with a brief description of the area.

“How much is this?” William asked while carefully closing the book. His heart was knocking about his chest with excitement. Eloise had told him she missed her homeland. Hopefully, this would help bring it closer.

The clerk shifted. “The application of color on every page makes

it more pricy than a novel or any other book printed in black ink.”

“I expect as much.” William gave him a direct look.

“It’s three pounds.”

Good God! That was more than thrice as much as he’d thought it would be. Not that he couldn’t afford it, but really, it was an exorbitant amount – as much as he’d paid for his last saddle. “Is it hand painted and inlaid with gold?”

“Umm...”

William sighed. “It’s fine. I’ll take it.”

“You will?”

“Yes. Please wrap it for me.” He wanted to do something not only nice but useful for Eloise, and while it was inappropriate of him to purchase a gift for her, he decided to ignore the social stricture. Making her happy was more important.

The shopkeeper beamed as he handed over the brown paper parcel in exchange for William’s coin. “Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you too.”

Pleased with himself, and with his heart a great deal lighter than earlier, William continued on his way. He arrived home and handed his hat and gloves to Simmons. A nervous sort of energy fizzed through his veins. He wanted to seek out Eloise right away and give her the gift, only that wouldn’t do at all, would it? Someone might see and he couldn’t have that. Not if he was to safeguard her reputation.

He pondered his options. The upper floor where the servants slept should be vacant right now. Perhaps if he went up there and left the book in her bedchamber? No. That wouldn’t work. Not only because he’d no idea which room was hers but because it would be disastrous if he got caught.

Athena.

That was it.

He’d enlist her help.

It wasn’t the perfect solution, especially since he dreaded all the questions he’d most likely have to answer, but it was the best he could think of. He started upstairs and was soon standing outside her door. He raised his hand to knock but paused when a muffled sound met his ears. Was his sister crying?

Leaning in, he strained to listen. Another sob sounded. William frowned. His sister was allowed her privacy. He didn’t want to intrude. But drat it all, if she was suffering and he could help... The

least he could do was tell her he was there to offer support.

He knocked.

A pause followed and then the door opened a smidgen. Athena's face appeared in the crack, completely blotch free. "Yes?"

Uncertainty prompted William to hesitate. His sister didn't look unwell in the least, so perhaps the sound he'd heard had been something else. He cleared his throat. "May I come in?"

"Er..." He raised an eyebrow when she glanced over her shoulder. "Right now?"

What an odd question.

"I'd rather not stand out here waiting."

"Hmm..."

"Athena?"

"Yes?"

"What's going on?"

She scrunched her nose. "Perhaps you can come back later?"

Something in her tone made the back of his neck prickle. He placed his palm against the door and gave it a push. Athena stepped back with a muttered and very unladylike curse. William took a step forward and entered the room. His gaze roamed the neat space until he found Eloise. She was sitting on Athena's bed.

"Forgive me, I..." He studied her hunched shoulders, the way her hand covered her mouth, and her downcast eyes, then turned to Athena, "What's happened?"

"A letter arrived. Eloise's grandfather has taken ill, and her mother writes that he hasn't a lot of time left."

A knot formed in William's throat, and his heart beat loud in his ears. "You must go to him at once."

It was the only solution.

"I've told her as much but she insists on waiting to speak with Mama. She's afraid she'll lose her position if she's gone for too long."

"And where is Mama right now?" William asked. He'd returned his attention to Eloise, who looked nothing like the strong and capable woman he'd gotten to know. Instinct told him to lift her up, to help her through this, and ease her pain in whatever small way he was able.

"I'm not sure. She had a bit of shopping to do and mentioned visiting some friends, but I wasn't paying attention and—"

"Every moment is precious right now. We cannot waste a single

one.” Heaven above, he’d get Eloise to France on time so she could see her grandfather again before it was too late. “Help her pack, Athena. I’ll have one of the carriages readied.”

“Thank you, Will.”

He gave a curt nod on his way out the room. “Think nothing of it.”

Hastening back downstairs, William placed the book he’d been meaning to give Eloise on the hallway table. It would have to wait. Right now, hitching the horses and telling the driver he’d have to head for Portsmouth post haste was of far more importance.

“I can escort you,” he told Eloise a short while later when she prepared to climb into the carriage. “If you like.”

Her smile wobbled, but held. “Thank you, but I think you ought to stay here.”

“Take this then.” He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a pouch. The coins within jangled ever so softly as he offered it to her.

“William, I—”

He grabbed her hand and closed it securely around the pouch. “I’ll make certain you have a job to return to. I promise.”

She gave a tight nod – the sort that suggested she struggled to keep her composure – and he released her with gnawing regret. The door closed and he stepped back. “Drive carefully, but make haste.”

The coachman tipped his hat and whipped the horses into motion. William stood behind on the pavement, feeling as though his heart had just ridden off without him.

He waited until the conveyance was out of sight, then strode back inside, collected the book he’d bought, and took it upstairs to his room for safekeeping. After a change of clothes and a brief exchange with Athena, who promised to solve the immediate cooking problem the household faced, he went to his father’s study and patiently waited for Roxley to return from his club.

It took nearly two hours before the man finally walked through the door. He looked at William, who immediately stood.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” Roxley said. “It’s been a while since you’ve come to see me, you’ve been so busy of late.”

“My apologies.” William clasped his hands behind his back to keep from fidgeting.

His father cut him a speculative glance as he went to pour two glasses of brandy. He handed one to William. “You look more

anxious than usual. Care to discuss it?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." William took a large sip of his drink and then promptly said, "I would like to request your help with purchasing a house."

A tiny flinch was the only indication of Roxley's surprise. He took a seat, waited for William to do the same, and finally asked, "Why now?"

"Because I, um...would like to be more independent." He raised his chin. Whatever plans he'd had of going to Florence had vanished with Eloise's departure. He had to wait for her return, had to do what he could to make her his. "After living alone for a year in Lisbon, I only planned to stay with you and Mama temporarily."

"I see." His father steepled his fingers. "You want to be able to do as you please without us or your sisters being the wiser. Have you started searching for a new position?"

"Not yet." After all, he'd been meaning to travel. "But I will."

"Houses don't pay for themselves, you know, so while I am happy to cover the cost of buying one for you, seeing as I did help your brothers in a similar capacity, I would like to make sure you have the necessary income to keep it."

"I'll start looking for a position tomorrow."

"Excellent." Roxley reached for his glass. "Let's drink to success then, shall we? I'll find out what's on the market and we can go take a look."

Pleased with how well this conversation had gone, William thanked his father and stood. His next task was to make sure Athena had met with success and that food would indeed be served at seven o'clock that evening.

"William?"

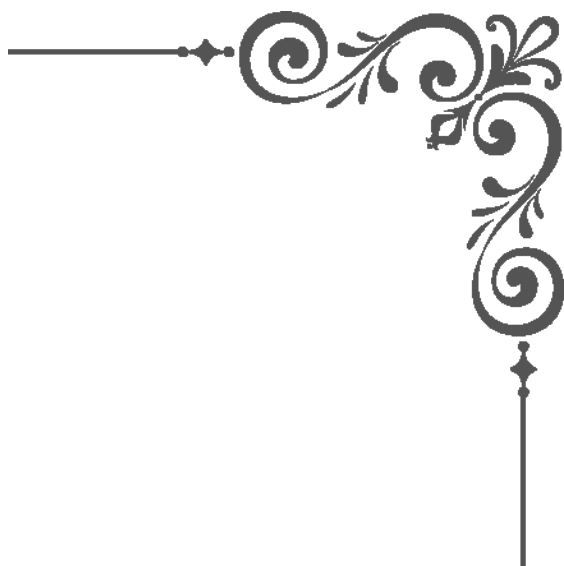
Roxley's voice stopped him before he reached the door. He turned and met his father's thoughtful gaze. "Yes?"

"If this sudden desire of yours to change your life has something to do with a woman, I do hope you'll stop and think with your brain before you allow your baser instincts to guide you."

William barely managed a tight smile. It was the best he could do short of sputtering in response. He inhaled deeply, then let the air out with slow deliberation. "Of course."

He backed up, then fled the room while hoping his father had not just seen straight through him. Because of course this had something to do with a woman. Eloise was at the very center of his

plan to remove himself from his family home. And yes, his baser instincts were at play, but there was something else too – something more than physical need – even if he still wasn't ready to study those feelings in greater detail.



Chapter Four

The carriage Eloise managed to hire once she reached Cabourg was significantly less comfortable than the one belonging to the Townsbridges. Not that it mattered. The only thing that signified was that she would reach home soon. She prayed she wouldn't be late and that she would be allowed some final moments with her grandfather.

Leaning into the corner of the cabin as the carriage left town, her thoughts invariably drifted to William. He'd been so wonderfully kind and helpful. The pouch he'd given her contained more money than she was able to make in a year. She could easily choose to keep it and not return. But that hadn't been his concern. His only worry, as far as she could tell, had been to offer assistance.

A soft smile pulled at the edge of her mouth. Since meeting him three weeks earlier, she'd done her best to keep him at arm's length, to prevent herself from liking him, and later from letting her increasing fondness for him evolve into more. But he'd been

determined to tear down the boundaries between them and reach for more.

Her heart trembled against her breast. The peril it faced on account of William Townsbridge was unmistakable. She already feared she was half in love with him, and yet, to hope for a shared future would be the utmost of foolishness on her part. Because she would never be any man's mistress, not even his. And that would most likely mean some tough decisions loomed ahead.

She sighed and felt the air burn in her throat. For now, she had more important matters to focus on. Losing Victor would be a severe blow to her, but to her father, it would be devastating.

Eloise glanced out the window, across the wide expanse of farmland followed by forest and meadows. A sharp turn jostled the carriage as it rolled onto a narrower road. Ten minutes later, it came to a rocking halt in front of a beige stone cottage with gray slate tiles and dark brown shutters.

The front door opened and Eloise's mother, Collette, came to greet her. She was followed by Eloise's older siblings, her brother, François, and her sister, Marie.

"*Ma chérie*," Eloise's mother exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Eloise the moment she stepped down onto the ground. "Thank God you're here."

"I'm not too late then?" Eloise asked while hugging her mother back.

"*Non*. There is still time, though I fear not too much."

Eloise pulled back with some small amount of relief and greeted François and Marie. Both lived within a half hour's ride, so she wasn't surprised by their presence and glad for the chance to see them as well, though she wished it could have been under different circumstances.

"Come." Eloise's mother linked her arm with Eloise's once the coachman had been paid. She led her toward the cottage while François saw to Eloise's bags. "I'll take you straight up to Vincent's bedchamber so you may visit with him, and then we shall have some *crêpes*."

"I can help you make them," Eloise offered.

"After you just arrived from a lengthy journey? Absolutely not." Eloise's mother patted Eloise's hand. "I may not be as accomplished a cook as you, but my food's not inedible either."

"Of course it isn't, *Maman*. I didn't mean—"

“You will rest and visit with Vincent. That is all. *D’accord?*”

Eloise nodded. “*Oui, Maman.*”

They entered the cottage, the sight and smell of it so familiar it didn’t feel as though she’d been gone. Samson, a terrier Marie had bought for their parents five years earlier, wagged his tail in greeting as he entered from the parlor. Eloise bent to scratch him behind his ear before following her mother upstairs and toward the second door on the right, which was standing ajar.

Her mother knocked gently and pushed the door open. “Eloise has arrived.”

She stepped aside so Eloise could enter the room. Her gaze found her father, Jean-Pierre, first before sweeping past him to Victor. Eloise’s throat tightened in response to her grandfather’s pale face and drawn features. And on account of the wheezing sound filling the room as he struggled to breathe.

Eloise forced back the tears that threatened and gave her father a quick embrace before crossing to the bed.

“We’ll wait for you downstairs,” her father said.

With a small nod of acknowledgement, Eloise lowered herself to the edge of the mattress and took hold of Victor’s frail hand. His eyes warmed the moment they met hers. A weak smile strained his lips.

“Eloise,” he rasped. “You’re supposed to be in England, *n’est ce pas?*”

Her chest tightened, squeezing her heart until she was left with two choices. She could either start sobbing or try to give Victor some joy. After all, it was hard enough to face one’s demise without everyone else around you looking gloomy and constantly speaking of death.

So she buried her pain and her fear as deep as she could, then said, “I’ve come to seek your advice on making marzipan. My most recent attempt was abysmal, you see. The consistency was all wrong.”

Victor’s eyes brightened and she could tell he was pleased with the distraction she offered, even though she was fairly sure he would know it was all made up. She was an expert confectioner, after all. He’d taught her too well for marzipan to give her trouble.

“Did you—” he gasped for air “—grind the almonds fine enough?”

“Of course. Until they were turned to powder.”

“Perhaps you used too many eggs?”

Eloise tilted her head as if in thought. “I don’t think so. Although the paste did seem very sticky.”

“Ah, *ma chérie*—” he wheezed “—not enough sugar. Add more and it will be fine.”

Eloise squeezed his hand and gave him a smile. “I knew you’d be able to help me.” She leaned forward to press a kiss against his cheek. “*Merci*.”

His eyes crinkled with appreciation. “Do you recall...when you were little...and I would give you a small lump of dough...to work on?”

Her eyes stung at the memory. “I loved squeezing it between my fingers.”

Victor chuckled, then started coughing when he choked on the air. Eloise helped him onto his side and smoothed her hand over his back in a comforting motion until the attack subsided.

He slumped back against his pillow, clearly exhausted. “You made star-shaped biscuits.”

“And you showed me how to decorate them with frosting.”

“You’ve learned much since then.”

“Thanks to you.”

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes as if in pain, and expelled it. “I fear my lungs and my heart will fail me soon.”

Eloise pressed her lips together hard to stop them from quivering. In spite of her stalwart efforts to keep her emotions at bay, she felt a tear roll down her cheek. “Not too soon, I hope.”

Victor sighed. “Tell me you’ll be all right. Is England all you hoped it would be?”

“I’m happy there. The family I work for is kind and generous.”

“You’re still young though.” Another cough racked his body. “Don’t forget to have fun, to live a little and...to make time for romance.”

“*Grand-père*...” Heat flooded Eloise’s cheeks and she instinctively looked away.

There was a pause, and then, “It seems you’ve already met someone.”

“In a way.” She sighed deeply. “You know I work for a viscount and viscountess. Mr. Townsbridge is their youngest son, so it’s utterly hopeless.”

“No situation is hopeless until you’re dead,” Victor rasped.

"Does he care for you, Ellie?"

"I believe he might."

"Then don't be disheartened. Trust that things will work out as they should."

Eloise gave him a tender smile. "You do not know how stiff the British nobility is. The only thing I can hope to be is his mistress."

"And that's not enough for you, is it?" When Eloise shook her head, Victor gave a small nod of acknowledgement. "*Je comprends.*"

"It's no matter. Just a brief *trébuchement du coeur*. A stumbling of the heart."

"You are sure?"

She sniffed. "What other choice do I have?"

Victor winced and Eloise clasped his hand tighter. "You could tell him about your mother's side of the family."

"*Non.*" Eloise shook her head. "I will never try to pretend to be more than I am. And I would never want a man who might be swayed in his affections for me by such means."

"He'll want you as you are or not at all. *Oui?*"

"It makes no difference anyway. The title vanished before I was born, so from that point of view it's as if it never existed at all." Her mother had never spoken to her of her family. What Eloise knew, she'd learned from Victor. "I am Eloise Lamont, and I am proud to be my father's daughter. I'll never dishonor this family by acting as if the name he's given me isn't good enough."

"Then I will hope and pray this man you care for will choose to ignore social stricture so...so you may be together."

"So do I," Eloise whispered, even though she knew it would never happen. William was a British gentleman destined to marry a proper lady. It was best if she accepted as much before it was too late.



WILLIAM GLANCED AT his bedchamber clock and groaned. It was almost time to go down for dinner, which meant yet another bland and unappetizing attempt by the maid charged with taking Eloise's place during her absence. It felt like an eternity since she'd gone away, leaving his life emptier than it had ever been before and he a nervous wreck who constantly worried if she was all right.

He missed her terribly. Even when he'd been trying to distance himself from her, the knowledge of her being in the house had

lifted his spirits. It was now two weeks since he'd helped her into that blasted carriage and insisted she leave. Two weeks since he'd felt the touch of her skin against his and gazed into her tear-filled eyes.

William's heart clenched. She'd gone to face the loss of a dear relation, and while she'd insisted he stay behind, he wished he had gone with her. It wasn't right that she should travel alone.

He pulled on his jacket and tugged the sleeves into place. Without a word from her since her departure, he'd no idea when she'd be back. But at least he'd be ready now. The deal on the townhouse he'd managed to acquire with his father's help had closed today, and William would start work tomorrow at the Home Office. The experience he'd acquired in Lisbon would serve him well in his new position.

Exiting his bedchamber, William went to join his family in the parlor. "Good evening."

"It is indeed," his mother said with a joyous smile. She was standing near the fireplace next to Roxley while Athena and Sarah reclined on the sofa.

William tried to reciprocate his mother's cheerful greeting. He didn't quite share her high spirits, but that didn't mean he shouldn't make an effort. "You look lovely this evening, Mama."

"Thank you, Will." Her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. As if drawn to the high color, Roxley leaned in and kissed her.

Sarah sighed. "I hope I marry a man who will love me as much as Papa loves you."

Mama's eyes sparkled. "I hear they're rare and far between, but not impossible to find. Especially not if you let me help."

A crease formed on Sarah's brow. "That's not what I was suggesting."

"In fact," Mama continued, "I think it would be a marvelous idea if we were to invite all the suitable prospects here for tea. It will give you a chance to further your acquaintance with them without other young ladies getting in the way."

Athena pressed her lips together but didn't quite manage to stifle her laughter. It came out through her nose in a snort. Mama gave her a disgruntled look while Sarah's frown deepened.

"I'm curious to know why you're in such a wonderful mood this evening," William told his mother with the aim to distract her. Sarah shot him a look of appreciation.

“Naturally, it has everything to do with Mrs. Lamont’s return. Our dinner this evening is bound to—”

William didn’t hear another word his mother said. Eloise was back, not far from where he stood. It would only take a couple of minutes to reach her. His heart knocked about wildly and his lungs, which had felt so constricted since her departure, finally welcomed the air he breathed.

With absent nods and “mmm...hmm,” he did his damndest to look as though he paid attention to whatever else his mother was saying. It was also vital he hide his excitement so no one would know just how thrilled he was with Eloise’s return. After all, he hadn’t shared his plans with his family yet and quite liked keeping them to himself for the moment. But when they made their way toward the dining room a short while later, he met Athena’s gaze and realized he must be failing in that regard. At least, if he was reading the sly gleam in her eyes correctly.

“When will you invite me to see your new house, Will?” Sarah asked once dinner was underway.

The salmon William was eating melted against his tongue, allowing a rich citrus flavor to liven his senses. It was followed by a piquant aftertaste and a subtle hint of creamy smoothness from the sauce with which the fish had been garnished.

“Once I’ve moved in, I should think.”

“And when will that be?” his mother asked.

“Well, the house isn’t quite ready yet, but I have been thinking of asking you all to join me there for tea once I’m settled so I can give you a tour.”

“Honestly, I don’t understand your sudden urgency,” Mama said. “This is your home and should remain so until you marry.”

William reached for his wine glass. “It is common for men my age to move away from home. In fact, most do it sooner. And after having lived alone for a year, I’ve grown accustomed to the freedom I’m able to enjoy in my own house.”

“It allows him to be independent,” Roxley said. “We mustn’t deny him that when it’s all part of growing up and learning to be responsible.”

“I suppose,” William’s mother said with a sigh. She met William’s gaze with sternness. “But I expect you to call on me at least once a week, hopefully more.”

“Of course, Mama. The house isn’t far so I plan on seeing you all

as often as time will allow.” What he didn’t want to delve into right now was the part he intended Eloise to play in all this. His mother was too pleased to have her returned for him to stifle her good mood with the prospect of losing her cook for good.

But in light of the offer he meant to make Eloise, there was no doubt in his mind that she’d soon be packing her bags and relocating to his new home. The only issue now was getting her alone so they could talk privately. Seeking her out in the kitchen was obviously out.

But he knew she left the house around seven each morning in order to make it to market before getting started on breakfast. He could intercept her as he’d done by chance once before.

It was the best idea he could think of. So after finishing supper and sharing a drink with his father afterward, William retired for the evening just to make sure he wouldn’t sleep in. He was up at six the following morning, and half an hour later, he left the house and walked to the corner where he proceeded to wait.

As expected, Eloise exited through the servants’ entrance at precisely seven o’clock. Her hair was pulled back beneath the bonnet she wore. Her gown was a stark shade of midnight blue, her expression more somber than he’d ever seen it before.

William’s chest tightened. He didn’t approach but waited for her to reach him before he stepped away from the building and made her aware of his presence. She looked up, her gaze met his, and William’s soul wept in response to the pain he saw there.

Without even thinking, without so much as one word spoken between them, he pulled her into his arms and just held her. No one else was about. The chance of being seen was almost nonexistent. And the risk was certainly worth it.

She didn’t resist, and when she eventually pulled away, she looked a little bit more like herself. “I made it there in time, thanks to you. He didn’t wake up the next morning, so if I’d delayed, I would have missed out on saying goodbye.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Eloise, but I’m glad I was able to help in some way.”

She nodded and recommenced walking. He fell into step beside her and promptly offered to carry her basket. She didn’t argue as she’d done before, which lent a comfortable sense of closeness to their walk.

“It’s actually nice to be back,” Eloise said as if this was

something that had just occurred to her right now. "Cooking for your family gives me a purpose and a sense of accomplishment while offering a much needed distraction."

"There's a chance for something more," William told her. He took a deep breath when she glanced up at him, her eyes wide with wonder. "If you'll allow, I'd like to show you something before we return to Townsbridge House. It won't take long. I promise."

A hint of uncertainty strained her features. "I really should get back as quickly as possible."

"And I'll make certain you do. As soon as I've shared my surprise with you."

She smiled, just enough to reveal a hint of amusement. "All right. Let's make haste then."

Half an hour later, after purchasing a colorful variety of fresh produce, William led Eloise up the front steps of his new home and welcomed her into the foyer. The door closed, shutting out the rest of the world and offering them the sort of privacy he'd dreamed of sharing with her for so long.

Heart racing, he set the basket aside and took her hand. "What do you think?"

Confusion filled her gaze. "It looks like a nice house."

He grinned. "It is *my* house. I bought it while you were away. With my father's help, I'll admit, but I've recently acquired a job at the Home Office, so I'll cover the necessary expenses myself. In time, I hope to repay him in full."

"How wonderful for you." She seemed to study the space with greater interest than before. "I must say I'm impressed with your desire to be self-reliant since I'm sure you don't need to be."

Her happiness on his behalf was so genuine he couldn't resist. He pulled her into his arms and gazed into her upturned face. "You inspired me to figure out what I want for myself and work toward it."

"I did?"

"Yes," he murmured. "You did." He flattened his palm against her back and drew her closer still. Her floral scent filled his nostrils, intoxicating his senses. A surge of desire swept through him, tightening every muscle and filling his heart with increased yearning.

The need to taste her was too insistent. He couldn't ignore it any longer, especially not after dropping his gaze to her parted lips and

catching a glimpse of her tongue.

His mouth met hers with a sigh of pure pleasure. God, how he'd longed for this moment and heaven above if it didn't feel perfect. Her lips were like velvet and as he deepened the kiss, he was rewarded with a taste that could only be described as wholesome goodness.

A small whimper escaped her, vibrating through him until he forgot everything besides her. She was all that mattered; her softness pressed against his harder planes, her sweet surrender as she wound her arms around his neck and met his advance, the honesty of the caress.

"You're everything I expected and more," he murmured while kissing his way down the side of her throat.

"William," she sighed, his name half plea and half benediction.

"Everything will work out, Eloise." Her skin was perfection itself, her scent so alluring he wanted to bury his nose in it forever. Eager for more, he pulled at the sleeve of her gown until he revealed the gorgeous slope of her shoulder. He pressed his mouth to her skin before working his way along the edge of her bodice. "You'll have your dream and more – we'll both get what we wish for. I promise."



HALF-DRUGGED BY WILLIAM'S passionate kisses, it took a while for his words to sink in and another for them to make sense. But the moment they did, Eloise froze. "What are you saying?"

He was still kissing a scandalous path across the edge of her décolletage, so Eloise placed her hand against his chest and gave him a nudge before stepping back. She looked into his hungry eyes and forced herself not to pull him back for another scalding caress.

His chest rose and fell in response to his rapid breaths. He blinked. Shook his head as if to clear his lust-infused brain. "You want to open a culinary school, right?"

"Yes," she agreed with instinctual wariness.

"Well, this will help you do so quicker than you intended." He spread his arms to indicate the space in which they stood. "You can use this house to teach anyone who'd like to learn how to cook."

A nervous bit of laughter escaped her. "You cannot be serious."

"I wasn't sure precisely what you might need which is why it's so vital you see it so you can tell me. I'll convert whatever rooms in

any manner you suggest and—”

“Why on earth would you do this?” The gesture was extraordinary – completely out of proportion when keeping in mind the length of time he’d known her.

“I don’t think you should have to wait ten years for your dream to come true.” He smiled down at her. “Not when I am in a position to help you realize it right away.”

She shook her head, incredulous. Her pulse was leaping with furious excitement. This had to mean he loved her. It had to mean he was willing to face all manner of condemnation in order to make her his. It could only mean that he would propose, and while she hadn’t allowed herself to hope for such an outcome, it seemed it was happening, just as Vincent had told her it would.

“What about your mother? I am still in her employ.”

“I know, I still need to discuss this with her, but I am certain she’ll understand once she learns why I did this.”

“And that is?” she dared to ask while her heart raced on, faster and faster until she feared it might fly from her breast.

“Because I need to have you in my life, Eloise. Because these past two weeks without you have been the most unbearable weeks of my life.”

No words of love yet, but that was all right. She could see the emotion shining in his eyes. “So I would be...”

“Able to fulfill your purpose.”

Every thought inside her head collapsed in a heap of disappointment. She’d expected him to say, my wife, or Mrs. William Townsbridge. “My purpose?”

“You desire to teach your culinary skills to others and so you shall. This may be my house, but it will also be a business, I suppose, which means we can both live here together without a single person raising an eyebrow. And that—” he clasped her hand and raised it to his lips for a kiss “—means you and I can finally be together, hidden away from prying eyes every evening, and able to enjoy each other’s company to the fullest.”

Eloise’s heart wilted. “I see.” She withdrew her hand and took a step sideways, deliberately adding distance. “So helping me open a culinary school is a bribe. Yes?”

He frowned. “No. It’s—”

“I will not be your mistress. I thought I made that perfectly clear. And yet you have crafted this elaborate plan in the hope of

winning me over.”

“I’m giving you what you want.”

“*Non*,” she exploded while forcing back tears, “you are giving yourself what *you* want.”

“Eloise.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “We are both adults here. Please don’t pretend to deny what’s between us.”

“It’s a lovely house, William. I congratulate you on purchasing it, but I shall never live here with you.” Turning away, she started toward the door.

He grabbed her upper arm and spun her back to face him. “Do you prefer Matt? Is that it?”

Now she was truly confused. “What?”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you and the way you look at him too. Christ, you’re like a giddy young girl when you’re in his presence. I wonder if—”

“*Arrêtes!* This is enough. My head is starting to pain me.”

“Not nearly as much as mine pains me whenever I think of the two of you spending time together.” He tightened his hold and leaned in. “It kills me inside, knowing he has more right to you than I do.”

In spite of his error in judgment, sympathy filled her. “There’s no need for you to be jealous of him. Matt is a friend, nothing more.”

“You’re wrong, Eloise. He wants you as much as I do, I’ll stake my life on that.”

“In that case we ought to prepare for your funeral,” she told him gently. Her hand cupped his cheek. She felt broken inside – shattered – and yet she had to keep moving forward somehow.

“You see, *mon coeur*, Matt doesn’t want a woman in his bed, but if you mention that to another soul, I shall run you through myself, no matter how much I love you.”

William’s hand fell away as his mouth dropped opened, and Eloise took advantage. She flung the front door opened and hurried out onto the pavement.

“Eloise!”

Her name followed her as she ran. She knew he would likely be faster than she if he chose to give chase, only he’d have to collect the basket of vegetables first and lock the door, by which time she planned on being well out of reach.

How could he do it? How could he break her heart so? It felt as

though he'd taken an axe and chopped it up into little messy pieces. Worst of all, she actually understood him. He couldn't envision marrying her, so he'd tried to find another solution. But he'd underestimated her pride and her willingness to sacrifice her own dream in order to safeguard her self-respect.

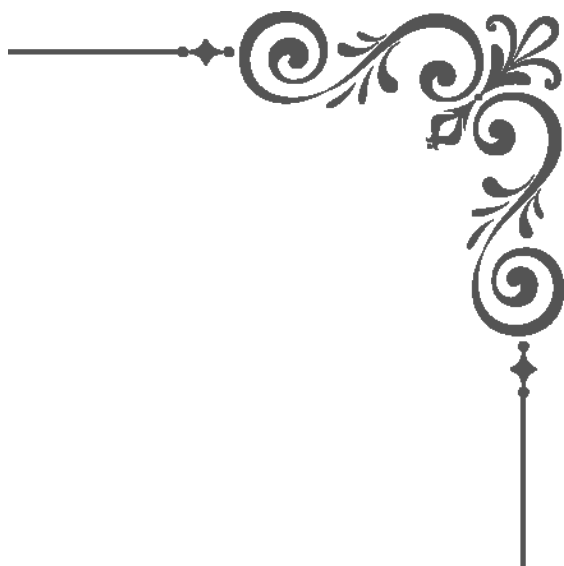
They were idiots.

Both of them.

He for going so far as to purchase a house and she for loving the blasted man. On second thought, she was the bigger fool for revealing how she felt. The words had popped out in pure frustration. It was too late to take them back. Unless she drugged him and then convinced him that he'd imagined the last half hour. Now there was an excellent thought.

Panting for breath she hurried back inside the kitchen the moment she reached Townsbridge House, past a series of startled servants, up the servants' stairs to the main floor, and straight toward the small feminine office where Viscountess Roxley spent her mornings.

After everything that had just transpired, Eloise had little choice. She knew what had to be done, and she had to do it now. Before William arrived.



Chapter Five

Stunned by the conversation she'd just had with Mrs. Lamont, Margaret sat at her escritoire for a moment after the cook had departed, her mind a muddled mess of incomprehension. Her first instinct was to seek out her husband, but she doubted he'd offer any more clarification on the issue at hand, so she finally chose to speak with her youngest daughter instead.

She found her in her bedchamber, nestled on her window seat with her sketch pad in her lap.

"Has breakfast already commenced?" Athena asked, straightening herself when Margaret entered the room. "I was just about to come down. Right after I finished this sketch."

Margaret closed the door. "I'm not here to fetch you down for breakfast. In fact, I'm not sure there'll be any breakfast now that I think of it."

Athena's brow crinkled. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Well." Margaret clasped her hands in front of herself. "Mrs.

Lamont just gave me her notice.”

“What?” Athena was on her feet in a second, her eyes wide with dismay. “Why on earth would she do so now when she obviously returned with every intention of continuing her employment?”

“I’ve no idea. When I asked about her reasoning, she did her best to avoid the subject.” Margaret thought back on Mrs. Lamont’s rigid posture and how she’d averted her gaze to avoid meeting her own head on. “She seemed uncomfortable, which troubles me. I know you consider her a friend, so I was hoping you might be able to enlighten me.”

“No. I...” Athena stared at Margaret. “She loves working here so if she’s leaving it’s not because she received a better offer, in which case it can only be because of William.”

Margaret hadn’t thought it possible for her confusion to deepen further and yet it did. “What on earth can William possibly have to do with Mrs. Lamont leaving us?”

“I don’t believe she’s leaving *us*, Mama. I believe she’s leaving *him*.”

Surprise caught Margaret completely unawares. Her mouth dropped open and a prickly heat settled against the back of her neck. “Please tell me he hasn’t made untoward advances. Good grief. I’ve done my best to raise him well, with the right moral compass, and dear heaven I thought I’d succeeded. But does a parent really know their own child? One would like to think so, and yet it is clear from what you are saying that—”

“Mama?”

Margaret blinked. “Yes?”

“You’re babbling.”

“Well of course I am. What else do you expect me to do when you’ve just informed me that one of my sons has behaved so deplorably, he’s managed to frighten away my cook?”

Athena sighed. “It’s just a theory, Mama. We’ve yet to prove it. And if her leaving does have something to do with William, then I believe it has more to do with her fondness for him and his dimwitted inability to recognize his own feelings.”

Fearing her legs might give way beneath this added piece of shocking information, Margaret crossed to Athena’s bed and lowered herself to the edge of it. “They’ve formed an attachment?”

“I believe so. Yes.”

“But how?” Margaret tried her best to grasp what her daughter

was saying. "She works in the kitchen, and he's been so busy since he returned from Lisbon, we've hardly seen him. So when on earth would he even have managed to speak with Mrs. Lamont for long enough to allow a *tendre* to develop?"

"I, um...I'm sure I don't know," Athena said.

Her cheeks were a shade too pink for Margaret's liking. She narrowed her gaze on her. "What aren't you saying?"

"Nothing." She coughed. "From what I gather they met in the kitchen a couple of times. He escorted her to the market once."

"And?"

Athena puffed out a breath. "Very well. If you must know I may have orchestrated a private meeting between them before Eloise left for France. William joined Eloise and me for our morning outing one Sunday while you, Papa, and Sara were attending church."

Margaret felt her eyes widen in dumbfounded shock. "Have you learned nothing from meddling in other people's affairs?"

"Only that it can have an excellent outcome." When Margaret opened her mouth to comment, Athena hastily added, "Charles and Bethany would have been miserable had I done nothing to help them. You know it's true."

"While I may be willing to agree, this situation is entirely different."

"Why?"

"Well, because..." Margaret stared into Athena's fiery gaze and sighed. "Class differences matter whether or not they ought to. You cannot pair a servant with a nobleman, Athena. Not successfully, at least."

"I don't see why not as long as they care for each other more than about what other people might think."

Margaret slumped. "I've always prided myself on my strong constitution, but I may need smelling salts to get through this."

Athena sat. She took a deep breath and expelled it. "There's something else."

"If you tell me she's with child I'll—"

"No, no. It's nothing like that. It's just..." A defeated look overcame her. "Eloise made me promise not to say anything because she feared she'd lose her job if you knew."

"What. Is. It?"

"Well, she's not exactly ordinary."

"And that means...?" Margaret did her best so remain calm and

patient, but it was becoming increasingly hard with each passing second.

“You cannot tell William,” Athena said with uncharacteristic sternness. “You cannot use what I am about to tell you to force a match. He has to want her for who she is as a person, because he loves her and is prepared to marry her no matter what. Do you understand?”

Margaret gave a nervous laugh. “Please don’t tell me I hired a foreign princess to cook for me, Athena.”

Athena grinned. “It’s not quite that glamorous, Mama, but I do need for you to give me your word before I reveal anything more.”

“Of course. I promise to keep whatever you’re going to tell me a secret.”

“All right.” Athena bit her lip. She didn’t look happy about betraying Eloise’s trust, and for a second, Margaret was tempted to tell her she didn’t have to. But she hesitated a moment too long and then Athena said, “Eloise Lamont is the Marquis de Villeneuve’s granddaughter.”

A whoosh of fluttery heat swept through Margaret. “So she’s titled.”

“Not really. Her grandparents perished at the guillotine, along with her aunts and uncles. Only her mother survived, rescued by a footman and his father, the Villeneuve chef. The title no longer exists and Eloise refuses to use it for her own personal gain, partly because she doubts anyone will believe her story, but mostly out of respect to her father and grandfather.”

“I understand. She loves her family dearly and would never want to suggest they’re not good enough. But what you’ve just told me does change things. She’s a far more appropriate match for William than I would have thought. Not—” she raised her hand to stave off Athena’s alarmed protest “—because I suddenly approve of her based on her connection to a title, but because this means she knows what being a member of the upper class entails. As a lady, her mother will have raised her with some sense of awareness. I’m certain of it. And that means Mrs. Lamont will know what she’s getting herself into if she marries William.”

“Only we can’t persuade him one way or the other by giving away her secret.”

“No, but if he truly cares for her as much as you have suggested, then perhaps we can guide him toward a revelation.”

“Why, Mama...” Athena smiled slyly. “I do believe you’re starting to think like me.”

“God forbid,” Margaret murmured, but she smiled at her daughter and suggested they go find her brother.



WILLIAM STARTED DOWN the front steps of his house. He was determined to chase Eloise and convince her to change her mind. Until he recalled the basket of vegetables she’d left behind. He also had to close the door and lock it. Exasperating tasks that delayed his progress.

His brain was still reeling. He’d planned everything so carefully, had thought it all through until he’d been certain Eloise would agree to what he suggested. After all, he’d offered her the immediate answer to her dream. With his help she’d be able to open her culinary school now instead of ten years in the future. Additionally, this would allow them to be together, and judging from the manner in which she’d responded to his kiss, there was no doubt in his mind that she wanted him just as badly as he wanted her.

Except she’d said no. More than that, she’d run off as if he’d struck her.

It made no logical sense, which had to be why he’d responded in anger. Because he’d been so excited to start a new life with her by his side, her response had hurt. It wasn’t right, of course. He’d allowed jealousy and heartache to take control, for which he owed her a most sincere apology. Perhaps *French Landscapes in Color* could help in that regard.

Reaching Townsbridge House after deciding to take the long road back for the sake of gathering his thoughts, William trudged up the front steps with heavy footfalls. He entered the foyer.

“May I take your basket, sir?” Simmons inquired.

William started. He’d completely forgotten about the thing. “If you’d please take it down to the kitchen, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course, sir.” Simmons departed and William set about taking his hat off and removing his gloves.

“You’re back.” Athena’s terse voice prompted him to turn as if he’d been pushed. Displeasure dimmed the usual brightness in her eyes to a murkier shade of brown. “Mama and I would like a word.”

William set his hat and gloves aside on the hallway table. “Can

it wait until after breakfast?"

"Considering there's a good chance there won't be any, no."

William laughed. "Of course there'll be breakfast. To suppose there won't is absurd. Why, even during Eloise's absence we received something. Nothing as wonderful as her fare, I'll agree but —"

"William." She gestured toward the parlor door.

He gave a weary sigh and walked through it, surprised to feel his heart jolt the moment the door clicked shut behind him. His gaze settled on his mother, who appeared unusually stiff this morning. His mind scrambled. Good lord. Had something dire transpired?

The very idea gave a raspy edge to his voice. "Is everything all right?"

"Not at the moment," his mother said, "but I hope it will be."

"Have you spoken to Eloise since her return from France?"

Athena asked.

A nervous prickle spread like a rash beneath his clothes. "Why do you ask?"

"Because she has quit her position," his mother told him with the exacting bluntness of an executioner's blade.

A painful jolt tore its way through him. "She's gone?"

"She departed about twenty minutes ago with admirable haste."

William wasn't sure how he managed to cross to the nearby chair when he couldn't feel his legs or his feet. Indeed, it was almost as if his consciousness was hovering somewhere above his body, watching his tragic life unfold from a distance.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, finding the seat and relaxing against the sturdy frame the chair offered. "I'd no idea this would happen. It's not at all how it was meant to be."

"So you did speak with her?" Athena prodded.

William shrugged. "She wanted to open a culinary school, and I thought to make that dream of hers come true."

His mother regarded him with unnerving sharpness. "How?"

"I planned on using the house Papa helped me buy. The idea was for Eloise to turn it into her business."

Athena and Mama both stared at him in stupefied wonder.

"That's actually a sweet gesture," Athena eventually said.

"Ridiculously generous, but wonderfully romantic."

"I thought so," William grumbled, "but Eloise didn't agree. She

fled when I showed it to her this morning and—”

“Hold on,” his mother said. “You said you meant on moving out.”

“I do,” William replied.

His mother narrowed her gaze. “So what you’re saying is that this incredible gesture you made involved you taking up residence in that house together with Eloise while she...cooks for you?”

“And teaches her students,” he added since this was a very important point.

Mama raised her eyebrows. “I won’t even bother addressing how you planned on poaching one of my servants, because there are clearly far more important issues to discuss, like the fact that you are an absolute dolt, William Townsbridge.”

William sat up a little bit straighter. “I beg your pardon?”

“Frankly, I don’t think there’s anything less sickening to a woman’s ears than being told she can have her heart’s desire as long as she’s willing to warm a man’s bed.”

Athena gasped. Her features transformed into stark disappointment. “You asked her to be your mistress?” And then she was suddenly upon him, hitting him wherever her hands could reach while William shielded himself as best as he was able. “How could you? How could you suggest such a thing when she deserves so much more? How could you mistreat her so? How—”

“Athena.” Mama’s voice broke through her daughter’s angry tirade. “You’re not helping.”

Athena brushed a stray lock from her forehead and took a step back. “I ought to call you out, William.”

His mother almost choked on her own voice. “There will be none of that. Good grief. As if the situation isn’t bad enough without my youngest daughter challenging her brother to a duel.”

“What’s that?” Roxley stood in the doorway, his soothing gaze sweeping across each person.

A sigh of exhaustion left William’s mother, then she quickly explained the situation while Roxley patiently listened. Once she was done, he looked straight at William. “How do you feel about her?”

“What?” William asked. His father’s calm voice, coming on the heels of Athena’s abuse, was startling.

Roxley rolled his eyes and gestured with his hands as if William needed the added movement to help him comprehend basic English.

“How do you feel about Eloise Lamont, Will?”

“I don’t know. I...” He gave his father a helpless look.

Roxley offered a sympathetic smile. “Be honest with yourself and know that no matter what, your mother and I are on your side. Our children’s happiness is of the utmost importance to us, even if there may be a scandal. We’ll weather that storm together if we must.”

“Charles and James warned me to keep my distance from her,” William said. “They urged me to forget her unless I loved her.”

“That’s not the worst advice,” his mother said. “Love is a powerful emotion. A great deal can be overcome in its name.”

William swallowed. His gaze drifted away from his mother and toward Athena, then back to his father. All three regarded him with rapt expectation, like spectators watching a tightrope dancer, waiting to see if the artist would make it across the void in one piece or fall to their death.

Closing his eyes, William did his best to block them out – push everything from his mind until only Eloise filled it. He wanted to protect her and keep her safe. He wanted to be there for her, not only today or tomorrow, but always. And he wanted to make sure she never experienced heartache again. Or if she did, then he wanted to be there to help her through it, to give her strength and whatever comfort she needed.

The idea of her being out in the world somewhere alone caused his heart to lurch with immediate dread. He hated it, hated the not knowing where she was or if she was even all right. Where would she find work next and with whom? Would they treat her kindly or would they be cruel?

She was a young woman, stunning and willful, yet too small to overpower a man who might force himself on her. William balled his hands into fists. She was his. She would always be his because...

He opened his eyes with a start. “I love her.”

Athena grinned, Margaret smiled, and Roxley emitted a satisfied grunt.

Panic charged through William with the force of a runaway carriage, not because of the emotion itself – that part was oddly freeing – but because of how badly he’d botched things. He loved her – the way she joked with him until he laughed, the carefree happiness he experienced in her company, how normal she made him feel – yet all he’d offered was an indecent position as his lover.

And to make the matter more insulting, he'd tried to bribe her by dangling her dream in front of her nose. If her feelings for him were even a fraction as strong as his feelings were for her, she would have been crushed by what he'd proposed.

"God, I'm awful," he muttered. "I've treated Eloise abominably."

"Then I'd suggest you try righting that wrong," Roxley said.

Mama nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

"You must go after her, Will," Athena exclaimed with bubbly excitement.

William stood, ready to do precisely that – prepared to travel as far and wide as it would take in order to bring her back. He frowned. "Did she say where she was going before she left?"

Silence replaced all sound.

Eventually his mother whispered, "My conversation with her was so swift I did not think to ask."

William looked at Athena while quiet despair filled his lungs.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I've no idea."

He glanced at the clock. *Hell and damnation*. "It's been almost an hour since her departure. For all I know, she could be on her way back to France by now."

"She'll need to gather her wits first," Athena said with reassuring confidence. "Eloise isn't the sort of woman who acts without thought. She came to England because she was better able to find good employment here among the upper class households. So I believe her first course of action will be to rent a room somewhere, after which I expect her to list her availability with an employment agency."

William tried to dismiss the annoyance he felt at the thought of Eloise having to find lodgings on her own. He'd put her in an awful, possibly even dangerous, position.

Focus.

"In other words, if I search the employment agencies in the area, I ought to be able to track her down." After all, she was a French cook – the best he'd even known – with a salary only few could afford. This limited her opportunities to a very specific part of Town. "I'll start right away."

"Why are you all in here?" Sarah asked as she entered the room. "Is breakfast not ready yet?"

William groaned. He hadn't the energy to go through all the details again.

"I'll explain it later," Athena told Sarah.

"I should go," William said.

"Have a slice of toast first and some tea," his mother suggested. "Every task is more easily accomplished on a full stomach."

"I'll ask the maid who managed the cooking while Eloise was away to start on it right away," Athena said. "It won't be as good, but at least we won't go hungry."

William sighed. Instinct told him to race off immediately in search of the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. But his mother was right, and if Athena was correct in her estimation, Eloise would try to find a place to stay first, which meant she probably wouldn't visit the first employment agency until later in the day.

Calmed by the fact that he was sure to find her somewhere nearby at some point today, he agreed to have some breakfast before heading out.



TWO WEEKS LATER, WILLIAM wanted to strangle Athena for giving him false hope. He also wanted to stab the next person who told him to calm down. Especially when they suggested all would be well.

Nothing was well. *He* certainly wasn't and neither was his search for Eloise. The woman had vanished – disappeared – as if she'd never existed at all. Except she had. When he closed his eyes he could still taste her skin on his lips, could still smell her sweet fragrance like some sort of torturous memory imbedded in his brain. And not knowing where she was, if she was healthy or ill, safe or in danger, able to make ends meet or struggling to get by, was putting him in a crazed state. Never in his life had he worried so much about another person or longed for someone so dreadfully much. It was like having his heart ripped from his chest and tossed into an empty void.

Pushing his horse into a faster gallop, he rode across the far side of Hyde Park with Charles and James close behind. His brothers had stepped in to help inquire after Eloise at the various employment agencies. When that idea had failed, they'd searched every tavern, inn, and potential boarding house London had to offer while also asking the men at their various clubs if their wives had recently hired a new French cook. The answer was never what

William hoped for.

“Perhaps you should get away for a bit,” James suggested once they’d slowed their horses to a trot. “You look haggard.”

William sent him a scowl. “I’m not sleeping well.”

“Of course you’re not,” Charles said. “This search for Mrs. Lamont has taken over your life.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting I stop looking for her,” William growled.

“Of course not. But you must take care of your health and sanity. Allowing this to destroy you will be of no use to anyone, certainly not to Mrs. Lamont once you find her.”

William gave him a woeful smile. He appreciated the use of when as opposed to if. “Perhaps a brief reprieve wouldn’t be the worst idea in the world.”

“Abigail and I have been invited to attend a house party next Friday at Mr. and Mrs. Bertram’s estate,” James said. “It’s near Dartford, which isn’t so far, so you could return to London within a few hours whenever you please, and since it’s only for the weekend it won’t interfere with your work. I can ask if you might be allowed to join us.”

Spending time with a bunch of people who’d all be in a cheerful mood, wanting to play games and have fun, was frankly the last thing William was in the mood for. But much like the foul tasting cod-liver oil he’d been spoon fed as a child, it might be what he needed.

“Thank you,” he said while trying to sound at least somewhat enthusiastic. “I’d appreciate that.”

What he failed to predict was that the house party would turn out to be more hellish than he’d expected. Every guest, without exception – save him – belonged to a couple. He discovered this when he chose to go for a walk sometime after his arrival. Savoring the fresh air, he strolled past the lake while taking pleasure in the sound of ducks splashing about.

The setting was wonderfully romantic. He wished Eloise were there to enjoy it with him. The thought of her sliced right through him with startling swiftness, and he decided to try and locate some gentlemen with whom to enjoy a game of billiards. But when he returned to the house, he realized everyone else was paired off and that he was the only bachelor present.

Which only made Eloise’s absence all the more poignant. Christ,

he missed her. He wished she was there to throw flour in his face, to upbraid him for stealing a bread roll, or simply to share her excitement over a mushroom.

He sighed as he lowered himself to a corner armchair in the parlor later that evening in order to await dinner. Coming here had seemed like a good idea last week, but he was certain now that it had been a mistake. Honestly, he ought to have gone to France instead and attempted finding her family. If she hadn't returned there, then at least he'd know to keep looking in England.

The idea grew within him until he began tapping his foot. He was suddenly quite impatient to leave. First thing in the morning he'd pack his bags and depart. Portsmouth was less than a day's travel from here. He could be in France the day after tomorrow and

"What are you doing gathering dust over here by yourself?" James asked, interrupting William's thoughts. He and Abigail had somehow materialized before him as if conjured out of thin air.

William stood and smoothed his jacket. He'd been so caught up in his own imaginings, he'd failed to realize the room had filled to capacity during the last few minutes. "Just contemplating my next move."

James raised an eyebrow. "Nothing too drastic, I hope."

"There are times when only drastic measures will do," Abigail said with a wry smile. She glanced up at her husband. "You know that better than anyone."

James cleared his throat. "Yes. Well. Extraordinary circumstances and all that."

"Quite," Abigail murmured.

The pair shared a secretive smile that made William's heart fill with longing. Oh, how he hated being around people in love right now. Not that he begrudged them the deep emotion or wished them ill, he just wanted what they had for himself. He wanted Eloise, needed her with a desperation he feared might damage his health.

A gong sounded and a double door opened. The guests bustled forward, entered the dining room, and tried to locate their seats. William found his easily enough. He'd been placed between his sister-in-law and a baroness with whom he'd danced once years ago before she'd married.

"It's lovely to see you again," she said. "I understand from your brother that you've been away in Portugal this past year. How

exciting.”

William did his best to muster some enthusiasm with the subject she wished to discuss, but by the time he began describing the food he'd enjoyed in Lisbon, all he could think of was how much he wished he could taste Eloise's cooking once more. Without even thinking, he began describing each meal she'd prepared – each more tasty than the last.

“Oh,” the baroness sighed a few moments later. “You were just telling me of your fondness for salmon mousse and look what we have here.”

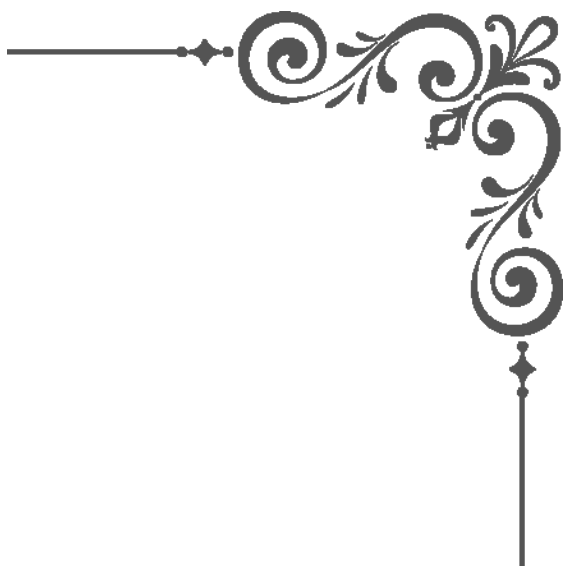
William frowned and stared down at his place. Sure enough, a soft pink pyramid sat before him with a twisted lemon slice and a piece of dill adorning the top. His chest automatically tightened even though reason informed him it had to be a coincidence.

And yet when he took his first bite the explosion of flavor upon his tongue was precisely the same as it had been each time he'd tasted Eloise's cooking. He shook his head. His mind must be playing tricks on him. Obviously, he was so determined to find her he was prepared to believe she'd created this meal and was somewhere nearby. It was the only possibility.

But then the main course arrived and the beef melted in his mouth, leaving behind rich flavors of herbs and wine. His heart knocked wildly against his ribs. Both the first and the second courses were identical to a couple of the dishes he'd had at home while Eloise worked there. And when a moist chocolate cake filled with nuts was served for dessert, he no longer had the patience to remain seated.

Leaving his cake half eaten, he stood. It was almost a crime to squander such a perfect delicacy, but the urgency within him compelled him to seek out the cook who'd made it.

With a hasty apology directed primarily at his hosts, he quit the dining room and made his way toward the stairs leading down to the store rooms and kitchen. If Eloise was in this house, then he was bloody well going to find her.



Chapter Six

Tea and coffee would have to be served next. Eloise had prepared macaroons earlier in the day which she now proceeded to pile onto several serving dishes. A scullery maid worked nearby on cleaning the plates, cutlery, and glasses that had been brought down earlier. She was a swift worker, and Eloise admired her speed and thoroughness.

“Please take these up to the parlor and distribute one on each table,” she instructed one of the footmen as soon as the macaroons had been displayed to her liking. Once he was on his way, she ordered two maids to take up the teapots and coffee.

A sigh of relief left her as soon as this had been accomplished. The most important part of her job today had been completed. All that remained now was for her to clean the stove and oven since this was a task she preferred to do herself.

She collected a tub, added some soap suds and filled it with water, then grabbed the cloth she’d boiled that morning and used it

to wipe away all traces of grease. It wasn't too arduous a task since she did it daily and took only about ten minutes to complete.

Once done, she rolled her shoulders and stretched her neck in an effort to ease her tense muscles, not caring if the footman entering the kitchen behind her bore witness. Bending over thirty plates in order to decorate each perfect pyramid of salmon mousse was strenuous work, and so was wielding an iron skillet.

The man's feet scraped the floor before drawing to halt. Eloise sighed as she went to toss out the dirty water from the tub she'd used. "There's still one more tray to take up. And then the dining room will need to be cleared."

"I'm not here to work," a low and all-too-familiar voice murmured, "but rather to make a complaint."

Eloise wasn't sure who gasped loudest, her or the scullery maid. She glanced at the girl whose gaze was firmly fixed on the plate she was scrubbing. Her arched eyebrows conveyed the extent of her shock. She pressed her lips together and went to work on the next plate, clearly determined to avoid any confrontation.

Eloise turned and her heart leapt into her throat, because whatever memory she'd had of William, the real flesh and blood man standing before her was so much more impressive. Her stomach began doing cartwheels the moment her gaze met his. Heat washed over her body, pricking her skin and causing her fingers to tremble until she feared she might drop the tub she held. She carefully set it aside.

He wasn't supposed to be here. Yet somehow he was, and heaven above, if she wasn't tempted to forget why she'd run from him in the first place or why she was here. Only, doing so would be a mistake. So she forced her spine into a rigid line, raised her chin, and confronted him with as much directness as she could manage.

"A complaint about what?"

The edge of his mouth lifted until the awful man was smirking at her. A flash of humor lit his eyes. "The food, of course."

Another gasp came from the scullery maid. Eloise stared at William while doing her best not to let outrage cloud her judgment. "You found it displeasing, did you?"

He crossed his arms, leaned against the doorjamb, and shrugged. "The salmon mousse wasn't as smooth as I would have liked, the meat had a bit of a burnt flavor to it, and the cake tasted like mud."

Eloise's eyes widened. Indignation forced her feet to move

forward of their own volition. "Like mud?"

"I struggled to eat it."

"You obviously don't appreciate what you have," she snapped with more anger than she'd intended. "A hungry person would have been grateful for the smallest bite even if the flavor didn't agree with their taste."

There was a pause, during which her statement settled heavily between them. His eyes held hers as he slowly advanced. "You're right. I apologize for upsetting you. In fact, I'm sorry for everything I've recently told you since none of it's true."

"You mean you lied?" When he nodded, she took a deep swallow. "So you enjoyed my cooking?"

"Yes, but that's not all I've been dishonest about, Eloise." He moved closer still. "I misled you about my feelings. Indeed, I misled myself, and in so doing, I fear I insulted you more than you deserved."

She knit her brow. "Are you saying I deserved to be insulted a little bit less?"

"No. I..." He briefly raised his gaze to the ceiling before returning it to hers. "What I'm trying to tell you is that I have spent the last two weeks looking for you, desperate to find you so I could tell you how I feel."

"Um..." A flicker of movement off to the side drew her attention away for a moment. Footmen and maids were returning, all of them pausing to stare. If William noticed, he showed no sign of caring. He was clearly going to embarrass her right in front of her colleagues. Tomorrow she'd have to find new employment again. The thought caused her face to heat with annoyance. "You've obviously taken a wrong turn somewhere, sir. Peter, would you please show this gentleman back upstairs to the parlor?"

A young footman stepped forward. "Certainly, Mrs. Lamont."

Eloise started turning away but a large hand grabbed her and spun her around. She gasped, unable to comprehend how a man of William's size could move so swiftly. "I'm not going anywhere without you."

"Please. Leave me be," she whispered.

His warm eyes bore into hers. "How can I?"

"Mrs. Lamont?" Peter asked from somewhere nearby. His voice confirmed that he was prepared to act – to remove William by force the moment she asked him to do so.

"It's all right," she assured the footman. "He means me no harm."

"Quite the contrary," William said with a smile so wicked she knew she would never be able to face the other servants here ever again.

"How can you do this to me?" She turned her head sideways to block out the numerous stares. "Have you no consideration for my reputation?"

He pulled her close, assuring her that she would be forever ruined in the eyes of the people she'd worked with these past two weeks. They would wonder about the extent of her relationship with William. Clearly, he was more to her than a former employer.

"Of course I do. It's why I'm here."

She gave a small snort. "Nothing you say or do will ever convince me to be your mistress."

His thumb stroked across her cheek, the gentle abrasion teasing her nerves. "Then be my wife, Eloise, and let me love you with all that I am until I draw my last breath."

Her heart stopped. Or at least it felt like it did. All sound sank into a muted background. She struggled to draw air into her lungs. Surely she must have misheard him. "What?"

"I love you, Eloise Lamont. I'll admit it took longer than it should have for me to realize it. I've been a complete idiot where you're concerned. It didn't even occur to me that I could marry you until my family made me aware of the fact that—"

Eloise drew back. Suspicion put a pause on her elation. "What did Athena tell you?"

William blinked. "She struck me and gave me a thorough haranguing for treating you poorly."

"And?"

"And that's it. My father was actually the one who made me see that anything's possible as long as you're willing to face the consequences. And if marrying you means I might have to give up Society, then so much the better, I say."

She stared at him. "Are you certain?"

"I've never been surer of anything else in my life. Good God, Eloise, you've no idea what I went through after I learned you were gone. I've suffered every day."

"I'm sorry. I just didn't think we could have a proper future together."

“Neither did I until it occurred to me that the only thing that matters to me is you. I don’t need anything else, but without you, misery will be a guarantee. I’ll never be happy. I’ll never have children because lord knows I’ll never allow another woman to take your place. I’ll never—”

“Yes.”

He went utterly still. “Yes?”

She wound her arms around his neck and rose up onto her toes to press a kiss against his lips. If he didn’t care what other people thought then neither would she. “I love you too, Mr. William Townsbridge, and nothing would delight me more than becoming your wife.”



IT WAS LIKE A DREAM – a glorious, wonderful, perfectly orchestrated dream. Only it was so much better because it was real. Eloise stood before him, dressed in a wedding gown, prepared to bind herself to him forever.

William’s heart tripled in size and leapt with joy. He’d watched his parents as he grew up, so he knew love could be obtained between husband and wife. This had later been confirmed when Charles and James had married, but William hadn’t thought he would ever enjoy such depth of emotion with a partner. He wasn’t sure why, but perhaps it was because he hadn’t been ready to do so. Until he’d walked into his parents’ kitchen and met Eloise.

“Now repeat after me,” the vicar said, addressing William. “I, William Patrick Townsbridge, take thee, Eloise Marie Lamont, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

William did his best not to muck up the words, but he wasn’t sure whether or not he succeeded. He was too mesmerized by Eloise’s crystal clear gaze. She smiled at him with adoration as he spoke, and then it was her turn, and suddenly it was all over and she was finally his.

He pulled her roughly into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her as if they were somewhere alone, as if their families weren’t right there watching their every move.

William didn’t care. Not now when Eloise was finally his. He

had every right to kiss her as much as he pleased, and he'd bloody well do so no matter what.

When she'd revealed her family history to him on the ride back to London from Dartford after giving her notice to the Bertrams, he'd been glad no one had told him sooner. Because his not knowing proved he was choosing Eloise for the woman she was regardless of her ancestry. It was clear from the way she spoke that she would never consider herself a part of the aristocracy. But it was equally apparent that she mourned the loss of relations she'd never known, especially on behalf of her mother, who'd suffered such extraordinary loss.

"Family is of the utmost importance to me," he'd assured her, holding her in his arms while the carriage sped toward Townsbridge House. He valued his own more than words could express. "Yours will always be welcome in our home, Eloise. And we can visit them too, at least once a year, so you can maintain your connection."

A heated kiss filled with gratitude and love had followed, after which they'd discussed where to settle down. If they moved to the country, they'd attract less attention, but if they settled in London, they would be closer to William's family, and Eloise would be more able to realize her dream just as William intended. Of course, they would most likely become the center of gossip for a long time to come if they chose that route, but Eloise believed it was best to face an approaching storm head on instead of running away. William was inclined to agree, and besides, he'd already bought the house. It would be a pity to have to sell it so soon.

"I almost wish we could skip the wedding breakfast and go straight home," William told Eloise once they'd left the church. He'd helped her into the awaiting carriage which was now taking them straight to Townsbridge House.

"I hope you're joking," Eloise said. "I prepared all the food, including the cake, myself. Do you have any idea how long it takes to make marzipan roses?"

William chuckled in response to her outrage. "I'm sure it's not the sort of feast I'd want to miss for any reason."

The corners of her lips curled upward until she was smiling at him with unabashed mischief. "It's important to sate each hunger in the right order, William."

A growl was all he could manage in response to that suggestive comment. God help him, the next few hours would most likely feel

like years.



ELOISE WASN'T ONE TO gloat, but she was secretly immensely pleased with how well the food had turned out. Compliments were almost unending and she accepted each and every one with a happy, "Thank you," until every guest had eaten a slice of cake and additional glasses of champagne had been served.

"You were right to be upset when I suggested foregoing this," William murmured close to her ear. A delicious tickle caressed her neck where his breath brushed her skin. "These marzipan roses are most delicious. I think I'll have to put in a private order."

Eloise grinned. "I can make mint sweets as well if you like. They're probably a bit healthier if your sweet tooth has a constant craving."

His arm swept around her waist to pull her against him. "By God, I do believe I'm the luckiest man on earth."

She leaned her head against his shoulder and savored his strength. "And I am the luckiest woman to have a husband who loves her so much he's prepared to help her open a business."

"The more cooks like you in the world, the happier mankind will be," he said. "Are you ready to leave or would you like to stay a while longer?"

"I'm ready," she said even as her stomach twisted itself into a tight knot.

They said their farewells and thanked everyone for wishing them well, then took their leave.

"Are you nervous?" William asked once they reached the house where they would make their home and he'd escorted her inside. No servants had been hired yet since they'd decided to interview potential candidates together, so William served as butler, setting aside Eloise's bonnet and gloves as she handed him each item.

She smiled. "I was before we arrived here, but now everything just feels right. And exciting, if I'm to be completely honest."

Devilish glee lit his eyes. "My sentiment exactly." He collected an object wrapped in brown paper and white satin ribbon from the hallway table. "This is for you. I bought it a while ago, right before you left for France. It was my intention to give it to you sooner, but so much else happened and I eventually decided it might make a nice wedding gift."

“Oh, but I don’t have anything for you.” As sweet as his gesture was, it made her feel slightly ill-prepared.

He gave her a positively roguish smile. “You couldn’t be more mistaken. Now go on and open your gift so I can receive mine.”

Heat flooded her cheeks as she pulled at the ribbon, loosening it until the paper parted and a book came into view. Eloise sucked in a breath as she read the title. *French Landscapes in Color*. Her heart fluttered about with mad anticipation as she opened it up to the first painting.

“Oh, Will...”

“I thought this might help bring you closer to home.” His voice was a little unsteady.

Tears clung to her lashes. “This is my home now. Here, with you. But this book is the most thoughtful gift I have ever received, and I shall cherish it forever. Thank you so much.”

“I will always do my utmost to make you happy, Eloise.”

Plucking the book from her fingers, he returned it to the hallway table. “This book is just the beginning.”

He moved in behind her, and his lips brushed the side of her neck. But before she was able to fully appreciate the pleasure the intimate touch wrought on her nerves, she was swept up into his arms. “Will!”

“You taste so good,” he murmured, carrying her up the stairs, “as sweet and delectable as your pastries.”

Her cheeks heated in response to his comment. She gripped the back of his neck. “Perhaps because I added a tiny dab of confectioner’s sugar?”

His hands clasped her more firmly and he quickened his pace, reaching the landing with record speed. Turning left, he marched them toward the end of the hallway. “Is that a French thing, I wonder?”

“I don’t believe so. Inspiration struck this morning when I went to check on the cake. It was very impromptu.”

“Well, now that I know your secret, I’m even more eager to explore every inch of your body.” They’d entered the bedroom and William set her carefully on her feet, then steadied her with his hand when she wobbled slightly.

Fire burned its way through her veins, and her heart beat with frantic anticipation. More so when she turned to meet his dark gaze. Her hand flattened against his chest both in reverence and in

wonder. “You’re my husband.”

It still felt like a dream – a wonderful, magical, fairy-tale romance. He was hers, forever and always, hers to discover, to share her life with, and to adore. Her hands moved to his carefully tied cravat, untying it with measured movements since savoring the unwrapping process was just as important as the gift itself.

The length of white linen finally fell away, allowing her to pull his shirt open. A sigh swept past his lips when she traced the pad of her finger down the front of his neck and across the small dip at its base. “Eloise.”

She unbuttoned his waistcoat next and pushed it and his jacket off his shoulders before she leaned forward and placed a hot kiss right over his heart, dampening the fine muslin of his shirt. He sucked in a breath, and his arms came around her, holding her there for a long drawn-out moment while he remained remarkably still.

And then, as if the need for movement were a matter of life and death, his fingers were suddenly working the fastenings of her gown with lightning speed. Something tore – a seam no doubt – and they both muttered a curse. Pulling and tugging, he forced the silk and lace into compliance until she’d been divested of the hindering fabrics.

His shirt was removed in a blur, along with her stays and chemise, and then he was kissing her fiercely while shucking his shoes, hose, trousers, and smalls. She kicked off her slippers so only her stockings remained, but when she moved to take them off, he clasped her hands and wound them about his neck.

“Leave them,” he murmured. Upon which he lowered her onto the bed and proceeded to see to the task himself with torturous slowness. His eyes gleamed as his gaze roved over her exposed body. “If you’ll recall, you took your time with my cravat. Now it’s my turn.”

She gasped when his fingers traced over a sensitive spot at the back of her knee, then again when his knuckles scraped the inside of her thigh, until he was done with his task and his fingers found other places to explore, at which point she sighed with exquisite pleasure.

“You’re everything I’ve dreamed of and so much more,” he murmured when he settled between her thighs a while later. His voice was rough with emotion. “I love you, Eloise. I’ll always love

you, and I promise to make this experience as perfect for you as I can.”

At which point he kissed her hard, distracting her from the brief pain that followed and sweeping her into a glorious world where only the two of them existed. It was bright and beautiful, complete with magnificent sensations she’d never before known existed – a place where flight became possible and exquisite bliss an absolute guarantee.

“How do you feel?” he asked, his voice more strained than usual.

“As if I could conquer the world,” she replied on a sigh while a sweeping sensation of tingles spread through each limb.

“You’ve conquered me,” he said, then kissed her again while shifting his body just so.

Light exploded behind her eyes as the most incredible feeling captured her body. It tore straight through her, so fierce and spine-tingling good she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to stop it or make it continue. “William.”

“Yes, my love. You’re mine,” he growled. “I’ve got you.”

He collapsed beside her moments later with deep ragged breaths and drew her into his arms. “You’re glorious. Do you know that?”

Half dazed, Eloise blinked up at the ceiling. “I was going to say the same to you.” She turned her face toward him and looked into his eyes. “This was without a doubt the most superb experience of my life.”

His answering smile was full of pride and warmth and boyish pleasure. “Mine too.”

She laced her fingers with his and snuggled closer until her head rested on his chest. His hand stroked over her hair with slow, soothing motions. Their first day as husband and wife was certainly off to an excellent start. Satisfied and comfortable in the arms of the man she loved, Eloise looked forward to discovering what all the days, months, and years ahead of them might bring.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR taking the time to read the third book in my Townsbridge novella series. If you enjoyed *Falling for Mr. Townsbridge*, you'll definitely enjoy the prequels. Grab your copy of [When Love Leads to Scandal](#) today so you don't miss out on Caleb's and Bethany's story, then move on to [Lady Abigail's Perfect Romance](#) to see how James and Abigail found their happily ever after!

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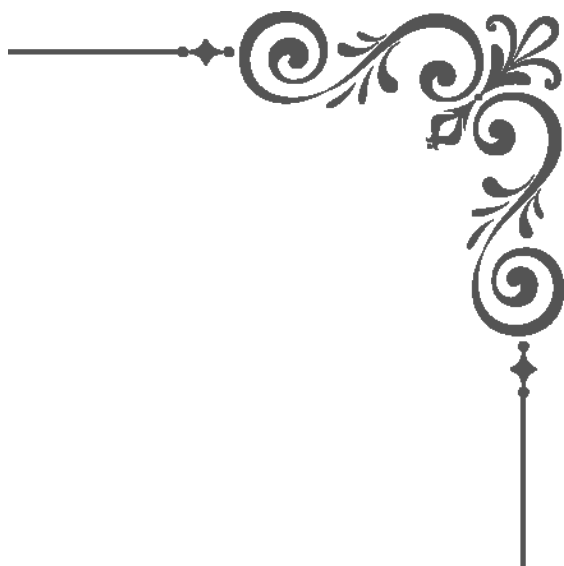
Or if you're looking for a longer read, why not try [The Forgotten Duke](#)? In this *Diamonds In The Rough* story, Lady Regina Berkly flees her wedding and turns to Carlton Guthrie, the Scoundrel of St. Giles, for help. There is no doubt in her mind that falling for him would be a mistake, and yet there's something about this man – something so tempting she cannot resist. What she doesn't know is that his kindness toward her is not only linked to desire, but to an all-consuming need for revenge.

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Once again, I thank you for your interest in my books. Please take a moment to leave a review since this can help other readers discover my stories.

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Chapter One

M*arch 1, 1820*

Smoky clouds scurried across the London sky as Charles Townsbridge made his way toward the park. He'd gotten into the habit of going for early morning walks years ago when his sister, Sarah, had acquired her first puppy. Their parents, Viscount and Viscountess Roxley, hadn't known about the stray for quite some time, and since Sarah had feared they'd make her get rid of it if they knew, Charles had offered to help. For the next eight years, he'd taken the dog, who'd been named Mozart, out every morning. Because even when his parents were made aware of Mozart's existence and had allowed him to remain beneath their roof, it turned out that Sarah did not have the necessary discipline required at her young age to care for a dog. As she'd gotten older, she'd become more responsible and had suggested to Charles that she should start taking Mozart out in the mornings. He'd apparently revealed how loath he was to part with the task, for she'd only done

it once before tactfully asking him if he'd mind continuing.

It was now two years since Mozart had gone off to meet his maker, and yet Charles could not seem to stop taking his walks. They provided him with an excellent start to the day, he realized. The fresh air and movement filled his limbs with the energy required to get things done.

Crossing Piccadilly, Charles was caught by a swift gust of wind. It tugged at his jacket, pulling it tight across his chest before pressing a kiss of cool air to his cheeks. Drawing the brim of his hat down over his brow, he quickened his steps and entered the park where trees bowed their heads in greeting. He was not the only one who'd decided to come here this early. He never was, even though the people at this time of day were sparse and oftentimes only visible at a distance.

Turning onto the path to his right, he took the same route as usual: past the flowerbeds, up the hill, and then down across the grass to the lake. A pair of ducks and their ducklings were bobbing on the water when Charles reached the embankment. He stopped to watch, a smile pulling at his lips on account of the fluffy little creatures swimming along behind their parents.

"My bonnet! Please, please, please, stop my bonnet!"

Charles turned in response to the outcry to find a collection of straw, ribbons, and feathers tumbling toward him. Behind it came a young lady, her white muslin skirts hiked up in her hand to reveal her stocking-clad ankles as she raced down the hill in pursuit. An older woman followed on her heels, albeit at a much slower pace.

Determined to help, Charles jogged to the left and caught the straw bonnet right before the wind carried it into the lake. Turning it over in his hand, he straightened the brim and removed a twig and some leaves from the light blue feathers which appeared to be crushed. The ribbons, a slightly darker blue than the feathers, were twisted together, so he untangled them next before fluffing the feathers with his fingers.

"Goodness me," the young lady panted as she skidded to a halt before him. Her close proximity now allowed him to gauge her age. She did not appear to be more than eighteen. "I scarcely know how to thank you." She raised her chin with a smile, her blue eyes laughing with quiet amusement. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair undone by the breeze in a way that caused one stray lock to fall in her eye while another trailed over her shoulder. Her mouth, he

noted, was a perfect combination of rose-petal pink and strawberry cream.

Charles frowned. He'd never compared a feature to something edible before. More odd was how his heart seemed to be hammering about in his chest. Deciding it had to be due to the effort of catching the droopy accessory, he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"There's no need," he murmured, a little surprised by the low timbre of his voice. "I am happy to have offered assistance." He handed the item back to her and watched as she returned it to her head, securing it with the ribbons. "I'm also relieved that I caught your bonnet when I did, or I would have been forced to go for a swim."

Her eyes widened with obvious dismay. "Oh no. I would never have allowed you to do so."

Smiling with every intention of putting her at ease, he told her wryly, "When a gentleman sets his mind to helping a lady, stopping him can be a challenge."

The color in her cheeks deepened, and it occurred to Charles she was blushing, which in turn caused a strange surge of heat to creep under his skin. He cleared his throat and acknowledged the older woman who'd now arrived. She panted loudly and gulped down several large breaths while clutching at the side of her waist with one hand.

Charles addressed her. "I believe a short rest on that bench over there might make you feel better." Stepping forward, he offered her his arm and saw the look of surprise on the young lady's face.

A complicated mixture of emotions shot through him, compiled from the pleasure of doing something useful and the knowledge that many of those who belonged to his set would not offer help to a servant. And that was clearly what this woman was – a maid, most likely, charged with acting as chaperone.

He guided her to the bench and helped ease her down onto the seat. "Better?" he inquired. The chaperone nodded. "Try taking a few deep breaths. Slowly. Not so fast."

She did as he suggested and gradually managed to recover from her exertion. "Thank you, sir. I'm ever so grateful for your assistance."

"As am I," the young lady told him. She'd followed him and the older woman over to the bench and was now standing right beside

him.

A jolt of awareness shot through Charles, most likely because she was closer than he'd expected. He turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers and...something indescribable tumbled through him, racing along every vein and snapping at each of his nerves. He'd heard his sisters talk about fated romantic encounters and falling in love at first sight and a slew of other fanciful notions that young girls dreamed of. What he hadn't imagined was that he would ever have cause to wonder if such things were actually possible or if it might one day happen to him.

He did so now, however, for there was something about this woman that sparked his interest. But then the chaperone coughed, and Charles shook his head. He'd obviously lost his mind. There was no such thing as love at first sight, just physical attraction, which was hardly enough to call for courtship or marriage.

With this in mind, he took a step sideways, adding a bit more distance so as not to have his senses stirred even further by the young lady's scent. It was far too sweet to be ignored and only served to tempt him with possibilities.

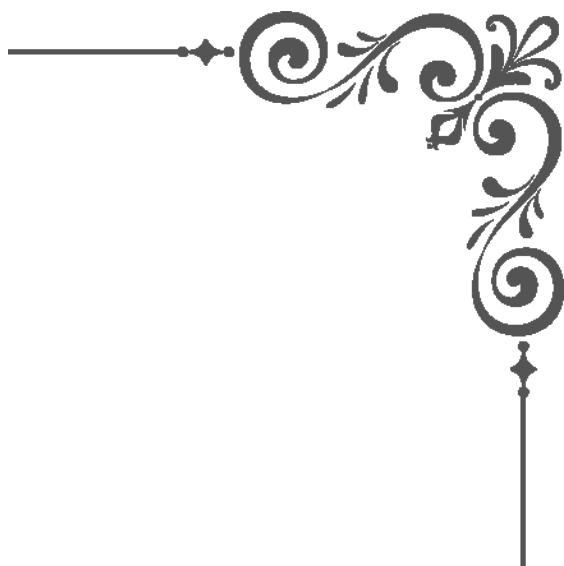
So he touched the brim of his hat with his hand and addressed both women. "It has been a pleasure, but I fear I must be going now since my family will be waiting for me to join them for breakfast." What reason was there to linger?

"Do you live far from here?" the young lady asked. Her statement was met with a frown and a firm shake of the head from her chaperone. Realizing her error, the young lady bit her lip. "Forgive me. I am often chastised for being too forward, and since you are obviously a bachelor with no ring on your finger and—"

"My lady," the chaperone told her mistress tersely.

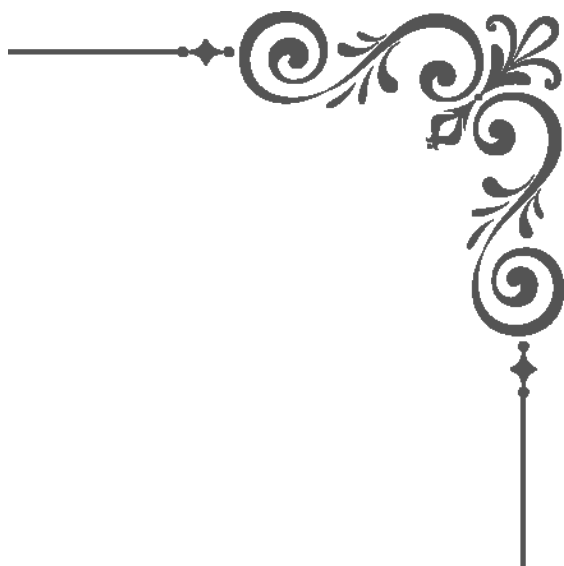
Charles smiled. He could not help it. "No need for apology," he said, then touched the brim of his hat once again. "Indeed, I thank you for brightening my morning." And with that he turned away, making his escape while he was still able – before he did something slightly improper, like give her his card. A gentleman did not offer personal details about himself to a lady with whom he wasn't acquainted. A proper introduction would be required. Most especially when addressing what he believed might be a debutante.

Purchase your copy of *When Love Leads to Scandal* to continue reading!



Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Killion Group for their incredible help with the editing, formatting and cover design of this book. And to my friends and family, thank you for your constant support. I would be lost without you!



About The Author

Born in Denmark, Sophie has spent her youth traveling with her parents to wonderful places around the world. She's lived in five different countries, on three different continents, has studied design in Paris and New York, and has a bachelor's degree from Parson's School of design. But most impressive of all - she's been married to the same man three times, in three different countries and in three different dresses.

While living in Africa, Sophie turned to her lifelong passion - writing.

When she's not busy, dreaming up her next romance novel, Sophie enjoys spending time with her family, swimming, cooking, gardening, watching romantic comedies and, of course, reading. She currently lives on the East Coast.

You can contact her through her website at www.sophiebarnes.com

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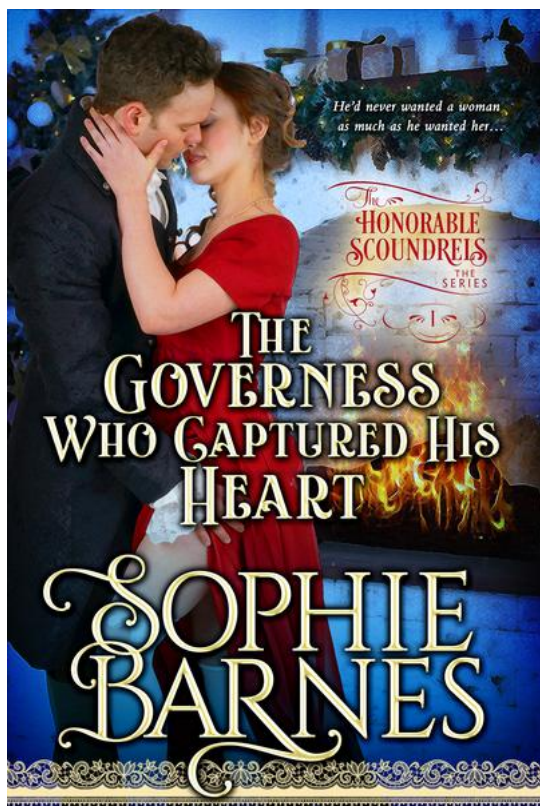
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Temptations or Priorities...?

Determined to help her oldest sister make ends meet, Louise Potter accepts a governess position in the northern part of England. . If this means accompanying an older gentleman on his travels, then she will. There's only one problem: Louise is about to discover that her travelling companion is not the elderly man she expected, but rather seduction itself...

Alistair Langley has no desire to share his carriage with his niece's newly hired employee. But the matron he expected to find at his door is instead a beautiful young woman, one he *knows* he can't

travel alone with. After all, he's going to visit his brother who is pressuring him to marry and produce a Langley heir—or be cut off from inheritance. When he confides in Louise, together they form a plan. But the closer they become, the more temptation beckons...

Until finally a choice must be made: Love or money? Or is it possible to have both?

- Please note that this is a novella -